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H A D A S S E H







HER BEAUTIFUL EYES WENT UP TO THE AWFUL FIGURE UPON
THE HIGH GOLD THRONE, ONCE MORE. [See p. 126.]

HADASSEH

OR

"From Captivity to the Persian Throne"

BY

E. LEUTY COLLINS

AUTHOR OF "TWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH;" "A DAUGHTER OF THE
COMMUNE," ETC.

With Illustrations by Sydney Starr and Frank Chesworth

LONDON

T. FISHER UNWIN

PATERNOSTER SQUARE

1891



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DEDICATED
To the Memory of
H. L. C.

"HUMAN respect and the dread of ridicule hinders many a man from steadfastly asserting the claims of God's precepts, as opposed to the world's maxims," are the words of a well-known writer, the truth of which may be verified in one's everyday life. And with the able consciousness of how such a man, keenly sensitive to the brunt of like experiences, yet having the truth at heart, may pass through life, and even death, misunderstood to the world at large, speaking only through the chords of a lasting memory to those who *knew him*, this Volume is, with due reverence and affection, inscribed.

THE AUTHOR.



H A D A S S E H

B.C. ABOUT 400

BABYLON.

“ There, from the rising to the setting day,
Birds of bright feather sang the light away,
And fountain waters on the palace floor
Made ever answer to the river's roar.”

Arnold.

.

“The wreck of matter, and the crash of worlds.”

PREFATORY REMARK.

IT has been asserted by not a few learned theologists that the Biblical book, or *History of Esther*, might well have been dispensed with from out of the number which go to compile the sacred lore, inasmuch as the theme in general of the story is but an historical account of the restitution of the Jews as a nation to their rightful power. Hence sceptics argue their willingness to discard the book, as being simply an account of a diplomatic eruption, afterwards quelled, and therefore possessing little or no qualifications in support of the higher poetical feelings. It is somewhat unsatisfactory to humanity in general that the "book" after the Greek differs materially to that of the Hebrew and Chaldee, and that great light—in fact, the *keynote*—to the beautiful romance of the Jewish Hadasseh's work should be only found *outside* our "Book of Books." Yet, notwithstanding the conspicuous absence of the name of "God" in the Biblical book, and the principal of an idolatrous era, manifested throughout even other historical accounts, there is at least a grand and copious illustration of "Faith," perfect and immovable,

therein—that faith towards the great Creator we may well copy and work out yet, in our own enlightened day, when no such terrors, national degradation, or slavery assails us or our fortunate surroundings.

If I am blameable in the eyes of some of the numberless sects paramount in our day in that I have gone to Scripture whereon to found a crude romance, let me be blamed, therefore. Are we perfect? Were they, 400 years B.C., perfect? Every age, every heart, can but echo, No! Therefore I refer my readers to history, and to the sacred law also; and see therein *man unchanged* then as now. Students can read it; theologists see it by the eye of profundity; and the meanest scholar in our midst to-day realises what it was and is to work, to fight, to love, and hate, and at last to die,—all only a repetition of the old past, be it all either to our gain or to our loss. Therefore I attribute humbly the authority of Hadasseh over the mind of Artaxerxes, and afterwards over the whole kingdom, as one of the most marvellous and heroic incidents of romance in the human life upon record in women.

The heroine was not a goddess, neither a myth; but a tender-hearted, loving woman withal—adroit, courageous, and godly; yet, like such women, desirous of peace and truth, and to see the fruit of such. I can only repeat, Go to history—Xenophon, Herodotus, Josephus, and the Apocrypha—for facts; but, so far as the

romance is concerned, thus confessedly have I encroached upon the feelings of the more exquisitely susceptible-minded among us, and who perchance are disposed to chide me for *such* surreptitious irreverency.

I will, therefore, to such critics who may be inclined to thrust me down for so deviating from any special conviction of their own, pray them to deal so far lightly with me as to this point. And moreover, to all I would make answer (so far as the romantic element of this story is concerned), I have but gone to the human heart for the principal material found upon these pages, in order to adapt the otherwise barren and stereotyped idea of a valiant and apparently unsexed woman into the pitying and natural woman as found in our own day and in our lives frequently. The barbaric delineation is more or less accurate, according to the age in which these notable characters lived, and is but little exaggerated.

THE AUTHOR.



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HADASSEH.

BOOK I.

CHAPTER I.

IN BABYLON THE FALLEN.

MARDOCHEUS the scribe stood upon the roof-top of his house in Babylon, which overlooked the ruins and devastations of that once vast and magnificent city, "*The city of Bel.*" It was situate toward the eastern gate, about twenty stradias from the wide banks of the Euphrates, and near to the great high walls of the principality which lined the sacred portion of the blue river. The dilapidated though lofty watch-towers, ten feet above the angles of the massive structure, still encompassing portions of the empire, loomed in the distance, emitting a fitful light over the vast square, with its five-and-twenty great streets so intersecting as to part the famous city right and left into no less than six hundred and twenty smaller squares, all now nearly levelled to earth by the assailer's arm. There shone, however, still upon the massive gateways of the Temple of Belus, partly renovated, the gleaming lights of pale blueness, indicative of the presence of the god. They adorned the

broken pillars and the weird statues everywhere abounding. The sun was now sinking, so that a ruddy golden hue covered the wide firmament, for it was past eventide.

And the hour was most solemn, for Mardocheus the Jew was alone. His age might have been some fifty years, perhaps more; nevertheless, his form was still erect and commanding, his chest broad and expansive, steady was his eye and hand, while the lineaments of his stern face alone scarce would tell of more than fifty years' troubled warfare in life, but even so. This man, having an eye as keen and piercing as an eagle, a brow lofty and serene, and the features of a Daniel, was a scribe merely, a writer for the "rich;" withal, a rugged scion in stern captivity, for he dwelt but a furlong from those whom in sorrow long since he had laid beneath the soil of a strange country, and where sleeping he would not leave them alone. Hundreds and thousands of his fellow-captives had long since left Babylon the harsh and mighty—thousands who had bent beneath the heavy yoke within those now gloomy fallen walls, years and years of slavery unrequited. Thus therein they had for generations lived and died, but it was past, and Mardocheus knew it. For he had suffered too—suffered so that even sorrow now has grown into his very nature that he loved it, because it was all that spoke to him of the lost and the past. Therefore he remained back in the city, close to the Pharos Gate, where he could see his brethren still depart, with their wives and children, on their way up to Jerusalem, at certain seasons in the year.

"Was not Mardocheus, with Anabas our ambassador to Darius, to accuse the Samaritans in the past?" said they. "And now shall we surely stay behind in this 'accursed' place, where the oppressor's hand still waxes heavy upon us through the rulers set over us? We have in nowise transgressed. Is it our fault, therefore, that we are treated as very scum, and that the citizens spit upon us, and call us heretics and slaves, and so grind us down?" Yet thus it was they upbraided him, he being a man of keen perception, and very ready at letters, for lingering in this city of idolaters instead of going up to Jerusalem.

"Friends and brethren," he answered them, "I will journey thither when I bring the tithes of my possessions to Jerusalem, as the King hath ordained, and so let that suffice. Remember, let every family be wary over themselves, lest foreigners are hired to destroy them. The walls of Jerusalem, through Nehemiah's excellent forecast and strength, are now complete, but still they do not shut out the wicked, ay, those who came heinously to lay snares to entrap us. But be wary, I say vigilant, and leave me here with the rest to remain. Look to yourselves awhile. Fear not for me."

Persecution upon persecution was still paramount over the land, everywhere people were still hunted from village to village by the Fire-worshippers, besnared by traps laid around the byways without and within the compass of this great Babylon; but the children of Bel the god who dwelt in the uppermost chamber of that remodelled structure,¹ Belus,

¹ It is presumed by several historians that Babylon the mighty

ruled supreme. The greater delegates hired at a low rate tribes of the Jewish captives, and set them to work upon the banks of the river, and to reconstruct the huge sewers and canals which Nabuchodonoser has caused to be made everywhere in the empire. That mighty man's artifices knew no bounds. His treasure in compass had filled the whole land, and his works were incredible.

Upon the marbled terraces, four hundred feet on either side of the palace, Mardocheus looked now upon the past labours of that King's hands—the beautiful hanging gardens of the city, famed far and near, the work of thousand and thousands of poor burdened captives, for the mere gratification of a woman's whim.

There remained still the vast arches which had sustained that great pile, which consisted of numberless terraces, condensed and defended by a wall of two-and-twenty feet in thickness. Then the stones were so closely set together with weeds and bitumen as to receive the earth laid thereon, and so deep that huge though broken trees now towered high in the air around, the cedar, acacia, chestnut, and the varying verdure of the poplar grew abundantly. Such was the work of Nabuchodonoser to delight the eyes of Amytis, the daughter of Astyages, king of Media, for her desire was for her own native hills and forests, and the King her husband furnished the

was not utterly destroyed by Xerxes, and during the latter years of this aged King's incapacity and infirmness, the Fire-worshippers raised up their temples and renovated much of the former devastation.

land with Nature's art for Amytis's sake and pleasure alone.

At the foot of the Palace Gardens ran still the lines of a beautiful lake, four miles in compass, the waters of which were so clear and transparent as to show the tessellated marble mosaic which paved the bottom, leaving only visible the mouths of two artificial canals to carry the overplus of water away into the Tigris beyond. This lake was a recipient of the river's overflow, for at the coming of summer the intensity of the sun would naturally cause the gathered snow upon the Armenian Mountains to melt into the Euphrates, whereby it would oftentimes run over its banks and flow into the city. Hence the works of great Nabuchodonoser, at which all people grew full of wonder. There had come from all parts of the land visitors to look upon the mightiness of the city, and to discourse upon its magnificence. But the fall came! The Medes and Persians, and their hosts, entered at the east, and, according to the Divine Law, stablished their standing in plain and city alike, and laid bare the great places. Years have passed since, and still idolaters offer their oblations to a god made by their own hands, and with hardened hearts make derision of the remaining community which are chained to Babylon at this day.

Mardocheus saw the space of ground which covered part of his generation in the flesh. Their bones lay all together, but he was the *last of his race*, and with none to take his name after him. A heaviness is upon him this sunset. He has been pondering long, How that in Syria once the good and worthy

Nehemiah gathered the nation together, and besought their removal to Jerusalem. Now was Jerusalem a great city filled with his own people. He loved the sight of her massive walls, the work of his God through the agency of his own kinsman, who has now passed into the shades of that mighty heaven. But for memory's sake, for quietude, and for protection to the remaining Jews in Babylon, did Mardocheus remain behind, that he might see the work of his brain reinstated and become the portion of his people, for ever since he had nought to live for but this and freedom.

The Temple of the god Bel was brightly illuminated as he looked. Around the eight broad Towers, built one over the other, repaired, and more gorgeously and barbarously decorated than heretofore, shone myriads of lights; while in the distance, looming in the air, was the weird, dismal chant of the priests, mingled only with the clang of cymbals, since the Fire-worshippers had sought to raise some structure similar to the old Temple, and had in a measure succeeded after the devastation of the departed Xerxes in the city. These instruments, used at the worship of the god, were ringing out now at intervals amid the silence, mournful and meaningless.

"O God of my fathers, Helper of our race, even can I worship Thee in those sounds that idolaters raise to this block of stone. O let Thine arm, our Shield and Strength, still sustain us, even in the midst of danger and affliction nigh unto us again."

With eyes uplifted he looked stedfastly upon the heavens and spoke, while a perfect calm spread over his face amid his reverie. He was absorbed, as one

drawn apart from earth, though in the flesh he stood upon the frailty of his own nothingness. A man of God, having righteous communion with the most Infinite in the secret spirit.

A hand, very small and cool, in the sultry atmosphere, as he stood pondering, touched the nape of his neck lightly; and, as if awakening from a dream, he passed his hand through the white hair upon his broad brow, and turned abruptly.

"Is't thou, my daughter?" he said.

"Ay, my father!" And she then uncovered her face before him.

She was only a child of some fourteen years, though beneath her white headgear, which had concealed her features, she might have passed for a woman. Her limbs were strikingly symmetrical, and her shape and height perfectly womanly; but she was, however, a Jewish maiden, only one who assisted her kinswoman Zillah, Mardocheus's sister, with the household duties. She was as the child of the house, nevertheless, and therefore beloved by Mardocheus himself, who protected her in her friendlessness, he having no child of his own. Nor did Hadasseh know that he was any other than her liege father, since she was an infant when he had brought her from Jerusalem, his uncle's only child, and he loved her as a father, refusing to undeceive her on any wise for her contentment's sake.

"Why hast thou come hither, my daughter?" he asked, after a slight pause, for he scarce could detect in the growing darkness that her face was very pallid, and a certain anxiety dwelt in her liquid eyes.

"Thy friend Sarados has just come from Ethiopia," she answered lowly. "He has been the space of five weeks at least journeying hither to this Babylon; but he brings sad news, my father, and is below with Zillah awaiting thee. Xerxes the great King, who has befriended our people, is dead, and there is a new King in his place.—A new great King, my father!"

"Ah! I expected so," uttered Mardocheus, vaguely. "The God of our fathers hath kept him in honour and piety among us long years indeed; behold, now the last of the three upholders of our rights has now passed away. Ay, he who befriended Esdras and the righteous Nehemiah is now no more.—Woe to us! woe to Jerusalem in the day at hand! But go, my daughter, go and bid Sarados come hither to me. Ah!—and the papyrus. Is it finished?"

"I have but two reeds, my father, to do, but I go with thy bidding first."

"Ay, child, I am eager for Sarados's news. Hurry, for I see evil ahead. I note accumulated persecutions, and our people still to suffer under a heathen dynasty. Yet hasten to me again at prayer-time."

She re-covered her face, bowed herself before him, and departed very softly. A minute later, and the traveller from the Ethiopian States was with Mardocheus alone.

He was a learned man, however, and had been cupbearer to the late King in his youth. From the dictates of Bel he had accepted the Jewish faith, and suffered much thereunto; nevertheless, he was warmly disposed to the scribe Mardocheus, who had rendered

him much adroit assistance at Court when in Jerusalem. Now he had hurried with the tidings of the old King's death, and to tell that Cyrus, surnamed Artaxerxes the Son, was ruling in his stead.

"This new King," said Sarados, "is young, and not of so firm a will as his father, and many murmur against his doings upon his brother. He has given over already the several provinces to the governorship of certain heathen princes, worshippers of Belus and his kind, so that every Jew is in fear; for it would seem that this Artaxerxes is easily controlled, and being full of ease and voluptuousness, will give up himself to these factors, and apportion his kingdom to the charge of his princes and allies whom he wills shall rule for him."

"God will defend us," murmured Mardocheus calmly, "nevertheless. Fear not, Sarados; for He whom we commune with in affliction and joy alike, will not easily forsake us, inasmuch as we have passed from as stern tribulations from the beginning of the world until now, so likewise shall we be still countenanced and brought through such tribulation in the future to justice."

"But, oh, my Mardocheus, it has been bruited that the King himself is against us; that the municipality, composed of Bel worshippers, now at the royal palaces in the metropolis Susa, are plotting against us already. It may be years, but years are grown apace in time, and we shall be destroyed—at last destroyed."

"Courage, Sarados," answered Mardocheus, "courage. Thou hast yet to learn OUR endurance. The God who

permits these sufferings, remember, also knows how to remedy them. O silence, silence, man! Have faith, and rest in *that* faith, and all will be well, even in the midst of the fire."

"Aman, the King's Chamberlain, the Amalekite, and son of Agag, who burnt men alive and scattered their ashes about the city like winnowed chaff, is still full of hatred towards us," returned Sarados. "Behold a saying which I have carried with all speed and anxiety with me. Thus: 'That Artaxerxes the King shall give an universal decree not far hence for the slaughter of the Jewish nation intact, and to *not* empower the said Jews to fight for themselves as heretofore, was decreed by Xerxes the Mighty, who trusted in the God of *our* fathers.' Shall we then, O Mardocheus, have all enemies and no redress? Shall we die as mere beasts, and not live to defend? or will the God whom ye hath taught me to worship raise us up unto salvation here while we live?"

Mardocheus grew stern, the lines upon his visage appeared deep and rugged, and momentarily a cloud rested upon his face, but it passed to give place to that infinite calmness so peculiarly his own.

He answered the convert Sarados in measured tones: "Learn the Jews' faith, O Sarados! and so come not hither with complaints, lest thou canst look yonder and not find a meaning thereunto. Dost see yon gleam in the sky, there—mark it! Look—for it speaks to *me* more than volumes of the world's lore. See! there! every twinkle saith, '*The Lord God watcheth.*' Ay, my Sarados, watcheth the scoffer, the

idolater, and the poorest slave among us. Could Bel, towering there in his height, create a word in the very breath of our God above? much more, suspend a world above in yon grey firmament *to live?* If we perish, so God willeth *we do*. But say nought, only go hence as 'tis willed. If we are raised in the land of the living here awhile, say nought still, but *praise*. For 'HE' who worketh good to us does as seemeth Him *best*. Faith, O Sarados, faith, and not murmurings thus."

The man was rebuked. No word further escaped him; he sighed, and drew from his girdle meanwhile some writings, commiserations, and pleadings from the communities, both in the provinces of Ethiopia and Susa the metropolis.

Mardocheus was now again deeply touched: "The death of the renowned and mighty Xerxes, who maintained the law of the Divine God in his heart ever towards his people, caused a vast difference to the nation now his son ruled in his stead; but youth is uncertain, and strange gods and women ever spread their influence over the wills of young kings, so that a hair will draw them into the abyss, if it be so!" Now Mardocheus read with throbbing pulses his people's pleas. "A new King reigns—an infidel. Oh! pray to the God of our fathers and our lives to guard us now, lest we are destroyed;" therefore until midnight Mardocheus the Jew stood upon his housetop and prayed alone after Sarados had gone.

The writings left by the convert had dropped to the ground unnoticed, so absorbed in devotion was this man, that the voice of earth drew no response from

him erewhile, he called forth through the mighty canopy of space as it were unto highest Heaven, and in the spirit his form seemed walking upon the sphere of an unknown track. He trod firmly another world, but clad in a new and strange body, for he was not in the flesh longer. Neither a captive, nor a troubled spirit, nor an author of fables ; but in peculiar communion with the *Everlasting*, his *Maker*—whom he loved and trusted—and his *Friend*.



CHAPTER II.

THE HIGH FEAST OF PERSIA.

THE governors whom the new King had set over the hundred and twenty-seven provinces of his dominion from Indus to Ethiopia had assembled together in the month Nisan.

Three years had Artaxerxes now ruled on his father's throne, and he was minded to give at this season a public demonstration throughout his kingdom, because of his increasing riches and his power. Moreover, such a feast was never to have been known, for this potentate was jealous of his reputation; and since he ruled with an undivided sway, he would have all people brought to acknowledge this greatness in as laudable a manner as became the subjects of the greatest monarch the world then knew.

From his tent, supported by elegant fluted pillars of gold and silver, with its widespread curtains of fine linen and purple, he looked forth upon the multitude around. Everything was arranged for both sight and pleasure. Messengers had been scattered over all the country near and far, issuing the declaration, "That they should have, every one, remission of their labours, and were ordered further to keep

feast throughout the kingdom for threescore days, on account of the King's greatness and majesty." And so it was done.

Thousands and thousands journeyed from west and south to witness the King's magnificence, each bringing with them rich treasures in gold, silver, and precious wares, which were laid before the King in token of allegiance and loyalty.

Upon the plains of Susa, and about the streets of the palace, revelled the King's guests, each apportioned a suitable space, each nation to themselves feasting and making merry. From chalices of purest rough gold flowed very strong wines. Beeves and sheep were roasted by masses alive, for the entertainment admitted of no relaxation. Like the great King himself, who made himself enjoyment according to his inclinations, so did the hosts gathered around him according to their desires, and as they thought seemly. The floor of the great tent was laid with costly aurichalcum,¹ brought from the royal mines of "Melos." It was reared amid the choicest garden of the great palace, so that the King could walk out as he pleased to enjoy the beauty of the season, for it was summer, and the whole earth was beautiful.

At a distance to the west of Susa stood the white palace of the Queen, where it was known dwelt the beautiful Median woman Vashti. She had been appointed this site in honour of the King's love; indeed, his vast consideration of her was known throughout the land, and so much so, that Artaxerxes

¹ Esteemed the most precious of all metals. (See Josephus, book xi. chap. v.)

himself commanded that every deputation, both of princes and soldiery, from every part of the kingdom, should minister themselves before Vashti's palace, in token of their allegiance to the King. This accordingly was done, although the Queen only received the King's subjects according to the Persian custom, veiled and surrounded by a vast suite of guards and the eunuchs that kept her royal palace, with the gardens attached thereunto.

Thus this great festival continued; and at the close of forty days of eating and drinking among the King's special guests, Vashti caused her palace also to be redecorated, and herself, garnished with the most costly apparel, made a feast to herself and friends alone. A hundred and fifty Ethiopian girls of fine and goodly appearance, the very flower of the dark women, were arrayed in scarlet and purple clothing, having the signs of "Bel" woven upon their red tunics, and carrying in their hands dragons of gold with eyes of rubies. This band walked in the rear of the Queen, followed by fifty-six tall Chaldeans, bare-breasted, and having winged shoes of gold upon their feet, and finely-wrought mantles, though light as air, yet voluminous enough to cover them entirely, lest they should come in contact with the infidel hordes.

This strange cobweb cloak was formed from the fibre of a beautiful little sacred reptile cultured in the Tigris, whose nests were weaved by the shedding of its own skins three times during the year, and the fibre thus extracted. The Queen's priests, moreover, who attended her person, claimed the sole right of

wearing themselves this sacred covering, which was alone worn on State festivals, or at the Queen's pleasure, unless prohibited by "Bel" the great god himself, through his ministers. The great beauty of these gleaming garments entranced the spectators; they emitted a lustre equal to the brilliancy of the scarabaeic wing, with rays like unto the sun for brightness. As these Chaldeans came down the terrace flight of steps, chanting odes to the majesty of Vashti, they appeared like dark statues of porphyry (for their breasts were painted with sacred signs from their crown to the thighs) having a cloud about them, since the breeze wafted around them the fleecy material of their cloaks, which were suspended by fine golden rings to their ears and ankles.

Then followed three hundred Median dancing women, with hair reaching to the soles of their feet, according to the custom of the art, this serving them as a robe. These were furnished with wreaths of flowers, while upon their ankles and arms were numberless bells, which gave forth sweet sounds as they moved every limb, filling the air with a curious melody.

The Queen's eunuchs in fours walked by the side of this band, each having his wand of office to command order among the women. These were some seventy in number, two being the heads, and as having right of jurisdiction over all the palace. Added to this procession, walked in fours also the cohorts of the private guard, with shimmering spears and shields, their helmets glittering like the sun's rays for brilliancy.

Thus she came to her tent, and stood among her own

people. Here, too, were gathered together her kin, and the whole of her acquaintance from the cities afar, where as a princess in her father's kingdom she had received them heretofore a virgin.

Her vast host of attendants were then dispersed, and the chanting ceased, as she waved her hand for silence, and entering the opening of her tent, passed regally through the suspended lamps to her chair. Bala threw himself at her feet. He was one of the youthful princes of her father's court, and at the time of her marriage with the great King this young man was suffering banishment for slaying a warrior of Syria, who had dared to aspire to her love. Now being recalled to Media, he journeyed to Susa, in compliance with the King's request, "That *all* men, nobles from far and near, shall be present to do honour in Susa the palace unto the majesty and dominion of the great King Artaxerxes." Bala had escaped from the King's tent now to look upon the Queen of Artaxerxes, for she was very beautiful, and he loved her as in the past. A hundred forms uprose as she now appeared, voices murmured words of adulation, as with her hosts she entered her tent.

Her long robes fell around her, only revealing the beauty of her form the more, because the folds clung to her limbs after the fashion of the Persian garb. A vest of green, threaded by diagonal streaks of silver, was suspended from her shoulders, over which fell a wide mantle of purple, finely inlaid with *Taïs* work of gold. A costly jewelled pectoral plate drew together the folds of her first tunic across her breasts, and she also wore a diadem of gold

in token of her dignity upon her head, binding her veil.

Her beauty seemed to awe the men around ; for though her face was hidden under a light gauze, this nevertheless failed to hide the outline of her features, or conceal her brilliant eyes.

"Bala !" she uttered, surprised.

"O Queen !" he answered, but no further word escaped him, yet she even trembled at the sound of his voice.

Her father's courtiers and the princes of Media drew near and kissed her garments and the hem of her cloak, as she sat in their midst, but Bala alone watched silently. After a certain space she motioned to her chief eunuch, and so sent for the young prince to her side, her vanity being piqued.

"How camest thou hither ?" she asked, coldly, as he stood near. "Surely my lord the King will miss thy presence in the tent, O prince, for his guests are making merry yonder, and thou art of my father's court, and shouldst be among them, and not here with my own people."

He smiled covertly, and replied, "The great Artaxerxes is full merry, and employed with the princes from the West, and they now witness the feats of arms of the Lybian warriors, among them many women. Moreover, my lord the King is already forgetful in his cups, and very merry because of it. I must stay here, O Queen, for my heart is heavy !" He said this in so low a voice that she alone detected it. Albeit one named Syrius from Greece bent a fierce gaze upon him, as he saw the Queen take from his hand a portion of pomegranate, albeit he said nothing.

Some were lying full length upon the earth, absorbed in their eating, others were lazily listening to the music of the pipes, blown by the acolytes from Babylon, and of many other notable cities. A strong voluptuous odour meanwhile pervaded the air, as the Chaldean priests poured forth into the cypods fresh spices and incense of every specie. Huge lamps also emitted parti-coloured lights everywhere around as Bala cast himself at the Queen's feet full length. Now there arose suddenly without the tent a mighty shout as from the throats of a great multitude. It came on from a little distance eastward, where was pitched the King's tent, and it bore so strange a significance, that all looked astonished.

"Hail the King! great Artaxerxes! Lord of the earth, from India unto Ethiopia! *Hail! Hail! Hail!*"

Cymbals clanged loudly, and the tramp of feet neared Vashti's tent amid a confused havoc. Bala started visibly. A light of sudden impetuosity kindled in his dark eyes immediately. If the King be coming hither now, what shall be his answer for his (Bala's) presence in the Queen's tent.

Vashti herself gave a quick look around. It was as she thought. Syrius, the Greek envoy, was absent. She knew he had watched her every movement, and peradventure upon royal commission; for surely this man had now hastened to the King's tent and apprised him of Bala's presence before the King's consort, and so worked mischief.

"Go!" she turned to him, and said in a whisper, "there is an entrance behind the throne here. Go, lest they seek thee alone. Go! I say."

But he grasped firmly his axe, while a fierce light spread over his countenance as he flung back the ragged locks that had escaped from beneath his helmet over his shoulders, and he stood up defiantly.

"O Queen," he said; "*I* am a son of the house of Media, and I face the foe from before me, *not behind*. O Vashti, I cannot quit thee thus. Bear with me, for I am thy slave; suffer me then to stay and face the King's greatness and anger, though it mean death. Still shall I not depart."

She bowed her head and paled, for she dared utter no word to him, whilst nearer and nearer came the hum of voices, and closer the priests of Bel pressed round her in their position of guard. A clarion now blew a shrill clear blast at the tent door; and amid the clamour of excitement brought about by the anticipation of the King's majesty and his coming, the purple hangings parted, and two soldiers bearing torches led the way in front of a small procession of men, which advanced to the Queen's dais of purple. Anticipation was quelled instantly, voices eagerly whispered, and men waxed bolder, for it was not Artaxerxes, but the band of chamberlains of his household, bearing a message unto the Queen herself. From the royal tent the foremost of these bowed himself before the throne, and touched the gold dragon held out to him by her royal priest, swearing allegiance to "Bel."

He, the chief, was a tall man, of forbidding aspect, which the gaudy sumptuousness of his many robes of state failed to dispel. In countenance he was sinister and repulsive. His flesh hung loosely upon his frame,

and was of a deep, yellowish colour ; over his sunken eyes protruded coarse tufts of hair that gave him a more repugnant look ; and his lower lip hung over his chin in such a manner as to give him the appearance of a brute rather than a man. Piercing the centre of his lip, as also through the lobes of his large ears, were jewelled rings, heavy, and so massive that the flesh was thereby drawn to so great a length as to hang upon his curled coarse beard like masses of impure matter. This man was Aman the Amalekite, of the lineage of Agag, who had ruled over the Amalekites for many generations past.

With him came the great King's scribe, Bygtha, bearing the word, and sealed thereof with the King's great seal. Moreover, a company of the bodyguard attended him to clear the way, and also the royal trumpeters of the Court. Two Ethiopian slaves stood with scimitars drawn before them to protect the Grand Chamberlain as he stood, and two furthermore bore his scarlet robes from behind him, lest any portion of his state should be diminished. This great man passed through the tent, for it was known he came from the King himself. And as he raised himself up before Vashti the Queen, silence rested over the throng to hear the King's decree he had brought hither.

Vashti, though she was Queen, in the presence of this man, all powerful at the King's high court, trembled slightly, albeit she stood up in her regal splendour, having all the majesty of her womanhood, and extended to him her sceptre, so that he might deliver unto her the King's command that had brought him hither. Bygtha the royal scribe handed

to Aman the scroll whereon were the King's words and seal. And after pompously appointing one of the slaves to unfold the same before him, Aman read in the presence of the Queen and her guests as follows :—

“The great King Artaxerxes, to our beloved and faithful Queen Vashti, sendeth greeting. Whereas, the princes of the royal houses throughout the world are gathered together this day within the greatness of our Court here, and have further set abroad in our ears a great controversy concerning the beauty of their women of their several lands, and also divers women of notable beauty, known to the world around. It behoves us, therefore, in consideration of the vanity of these certain princes, to summon to our tent the most beauteous Vashti, our highly beloved partner, seeing that the King desires to throw down the consciousness of these men, who boast in our presence of the beauty of their women as heretofore described, and to further show unto them our Queen's grace and beauty, which *far exceedeth* any other in the world, to our eye. Wherefore, our excellent and faithful Aman is commissioned to summon through this epistle our obedient Queen, so that she shall appear at our feast as though she were with us *alone*, unveiled, and not accounting the strangers assembled at the King's table; for the King hath sworn by her beauty and obedience this night, as excelling all other women upon earth, and that she shall come to him, as he commands. Given under our seal, and commanded from our mouth in the tent of the palace of Susa, in the month of Adah! at even.” The Chamberlain's dissonant voice had scarce finished the reading

of the King's decree, when uprose the aged Amitha, the Queen's mother, immediately.

"Woe to the curse of the cup!" she cried. "What man is this who dareth to break the law of the Medes and Persians, which commandeth no woman to appear before strange men uncovered? Is not the King's grace sufficient unto his wife?—a woman of the house of Media the powerful. Woe, I say unto him this day, that he doth scurvily reveal her unto the stranger! Listen,—when my lord the King hath slept after this night's revelling, will he forget then this folly, and rejoice that the Queen hath seen no man but the King himself, for it is wine that only hath brought about this madness, which desireth to break the just law of the land in the King's mind."

"I came unto the Queen's Majesty alone, woman," Aman replied loftily, "not unto thee. The King (may he live for ever!) requireth the Queen's presence in the tent, as he saith. The guests wait her, nor will the feast proceed until the beauty of my lord the King's Queen be revealed to them this night. Therefore, peace."

Bala's visage grew fierce. A mighty warfare was waging within him. He had stood apart from the Queen and the crowd as the King's decree was being read, but with quick, sharp gasps he now came forward to her side. He only looked upon her veiled face pleadingly, while deep rugged cords stood out upon his temples, and his dark eyes burnt like fire into her soul, so full of intensity was the meaning written therein.

The King's decree was of an unprecedented nature, such as had never been issued in the land before.

The terrible meaning of those words, as significantly read by Aman the Grand Chamberlain, had sank into her heart, so that her tongue clave to the roof of her mouth, and she could utter no reply on the instant. The King desired her beauty, but not alone this. She was to be gazed upon, absorbed by a countless multitude of men, in shame and confusion of face. Behold! the King hath sworn it, and now must she obey. Once had instinct at the close of the Queen-mother's speech caused her dreamily to seek the eyes of Bala, whereupon she now clutched the veil yet more closely around her, and made preparation to speak audibly.

Her figure arose, erect, commanding, upon the gilded dais, and like low ripples of water, withal clear and distinct, rang out her voice thus: "My lord Aman, the King's High Chamberlain, peace! and the blessing of our great god Bel cover you. Bear to my lord and master, the great King Artaxerxes, Light of the world, and Governor of Babylon and the East, my greeting. Say unto my lord the King, as from my mouth, 'I am my lord's faithful wife, and belong to him alone, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which are binding. But I beseech my lord the King to do not this wrong unto me, to look first into his heart, and see if therein is written that decree which only the lust of the eyes hath prompted to the desire thereof. Let him look. Furthermore, beseech the great King, my lord and master, to suffer me to abstain from obeying his decree this once, and breaking thereby the good law of the land, which suffers no woman to uncover herself to the stranger, saving her own liege lord and master.' Go hence, O great Aman,

carry my answer ; and, as thou knowest, a woman of the house of Media, and a king's daughter, so thou also knoweth the keeping of her word. See, therefore, to strictly deliver my words to the great King ; for, by the horns of Bel, I will die before I uncover my nakedness to the stranger, if it be the King's goodwill that I shall die, even so let it be done unto me."

All faces around were now fixed upon her. She looked as a spirit speaking from out the eloquence of a divine majesty ; for again, as she lifted her hand ere Aman could reply, a hushed silence fell among the assemblage—

"Stay a little further, O Aman," as with her small hands she lifted the crown (the emblem of her grandeur) from her head, whereby causing the masses of her fair hair to fall over her like golden threads. "Here, O Aman," she called forth, "here, behold, is my crown, which my lord the King's grace decreed me to wear. Nevertheless, now bear it back unto him ; for if my lord desireth me to appear unto *his servants* as unto himself alone, indeed then by immortal Bel am I no longer a *Queen* or the *King's wife*. Hear ye, O priests, too, my words, for I will in nowise break from them, as I *am the King's wife*."

A low murmur followed at the close of her message. It was as though a strange spell was worked upon the congregation. All were strangely mystified, the more probably by her presumption in disobeying the command of the mighty King himself, she being a woman, and under such subjection.

The Grand Chamberlain's brow puckered, he lowered his eyes a moment, perplexed, a covert

smile of superciliousness gathered upon his lips. Then turning abruptly unto Bygtha the scribe, he cried fiercely, "Set down, O Bygtha, this Queen's words, that we may carry them to the King justly, as she hath spoken them, lest we shall be called erring."

Then once again he called forth to Vashti from the foot of her throne: "Hear, O Queen, whom the mighty and just Artaxerxes hath so honoured above all women; hear me. Wilt thou still continue to bring down upon thyself the great wrath of the King, and incur his just displeasure? Behold, I exhort thee, while I am here, to remember this; and furthermore, reflect, lest peradventure when I return hither to my lord the King, thou wilt have repentance for thy words when it shall be of no avail to ye, for the time of sorrowing will be passed."

She held out her veil from her face, so that she might answer clearly, and spoke again unto him: "I say again, set down my words, O Aman. Let them be as I have spoken heretofore. If my lord the King's cause of judgment be hard upon me, and the sagacity of a wise and just ruler be so tried as to condemn me thereof, then shall I feel still less guilty; but I repeat, when my lord the King hath pondered the thing in his mind, behold, he will retract from his request, and suffer me to maintain my just dignity as becometh the Queen his wife. Return to the tent, for I have spoken. Around me are my kinsmen and kinswomen, who knoweth my words, and these will not fail me. Depart from me, my lord Aman; and I do beseech thee, if it be in the power of thy greatness, to consider with my lord, the mighty Artaxerxes, the evil he

doeth unto me his wife, and so dissuade his mind therefrom. Do ye so."

Then Aman the Amalekite drew near ; and having touched the sceptre, kissed his fingers to confirm his oath of truth, and set himself eastwards to depart from her.

Bala the Median followed them, having girded his axe. He spoke nothing, but strode in the rear, while his bright cuirass shone in the gleaming lights like unto gold. Upon his shield he bore a tiger's head, emblematical of his title as a warrior. He was of the house of Amakiah, who had slain his thousands upon the Ethiopian plains, stalwart in form, and fierce as the animal he portrayed in title. But he was wise in understanding, and stood near to the throne of Vashti's father, as toparch over one of the greatest provinces; and, moreover, it was known to all thereunto that he loved the Prince of Media's daughter, whom the great King of the hundred and twenty-seven provinces had married and taken to Susa the palace. Accordingly went Aman unto the King's tent, and passed on through the multitude to where the King was seated.

The feast was stayed awhile awaiting the Queen, for Artaxerxes sat above in a purple garment woven with gold from the shores of Tyre. A chain of emeralds, set in massive gold, hung around his neck, and a headtire of fine linen was upon his head. Two princes bore his crown behind, the weight thereof being too great to the King's head for too long a space together. The aroma of the Tonka trees and the myrrh came floating through the tent, for it was set midst the best portion of the garden. Around, piled upon scarlet daisies, were costly fruits

from every clime, tributes from the King's subjects. Those who had cultivated their grounds, endured the labours of husbandry, had sent unto the King specimens of their best handiwork, so that the place was satiated with all sorts of food and pleasures, meat and wines, not accounting the cups of gold, and tables of costly ware, and the hanging of yellow and purple, to delight the eyes of both wise men and princes from the lands far and near who visited; and, moreover, to gratify the King's wish, that for sixty days should they feast upon the fat of the land, inasmuch as never was the like seen before.

Aman came before Artaxerxes with his followers, and Bala went to the side of the throne, as was heretofore his place. A hush instantly fell upon the assembly, and the cups rolled to the floor heedless, as the Grand Chamberlain read from the scroll Vashti's words. Moreover, a slave placed upon the ground before the King's feet the Queen's crown, as she had desired, in token of the resignation of her Majesty, which she in nowise accounted of worth, should the King so command her to appear in the tent, as he hath said, by the mouth of Aman, the second authority in the land.

The Magi here uprose, with the princes and toparchs of the provinces, as also the King's bodyguard, for they observed that Artaxerxes was in a great passion of wrath. He stood up unsteadily, for the wine he had taken flew wildly over his brain, so that it was reduced to nothing of merit or loftiness, as betokens so great a monarch. Nevertheless, though drunken, he was fired because of his word being set

at nought. That instead of seeing, as anticipated in the heat of the controversy, the beautiful Median woman enter, with her train, according to his desire, came only in return the Chamberlain Aman back, bearing her denial, and furthermore, her golden crown, as a pledge thereof of her absolute refusal.

Artaxerxes was by no means an unfavourable man in person. Rather, his youthful appearance and firm dignity as a ruler had won upon the nations. Notwithstanding, he had been but three years a ruler, and had manipulated his government much as a young King who possessed no distinctive creed. Yet *not* as Xerxes his father had done, upon principle, for the Fire-worshippers of Bel now ruled the land. However, while Artaxerxes merely gave decrees as he chose, and after sending forth requisitions to the certain princes and governors, he rested at ease, and troubled no further into affairs of his kingdom.

If the Jews, dwelling in the countries and provinces, had their stronghold in Jerusalem, with its new, high, and mighty walls, he cared little so that the rulers he apportioned over the land did their duty and governed as he desired, in order that their complainings came not into his ears. He knew these people had softened his aged father's heart, and he had made them great concessions; furthermore, had worshipped the same God. But Cyrus, surnamed Artaxerxes, was young, and his desires were for himself, for youth is less wise in the understanding than age, though, like an eagle, it soars above wisdom, and forgetteth that wine, wisdom, and power are passing even the frailty of women in youth.

The King's eyes now wandered over the vast assembly fiercely enough. His purple and white head-tire slipped from the gold circlet over his forehead, whereupon a guard of his body advanced to re-adjust the same. Artaxerxes swiftly swung his hand backward, smiting the first man upon the face so heavily that a deep cut, from which the blood spurted, was laid open upon his cheek, so heavily laden with raw-set jewels was the King's hand that the signet ring upon his forefinger had caught the fleshy cheek of the slave and torn it open with the blow he had hotly dealt. The man sought no further to approach, but crept, humiliated, with his bleeding face, away in silence.

"And *thou*, even thou, hast dared then, O Aman, to bring hither into my presence so insolent a reply? Stand back, dog, and to-morrow thou too shalt answer. Ho!" he called still loudly. "Ho, Prince Memucan of the great Magi, come hither and hear me. Do ye heed? How dost thou tarry?"

Memucan advanced. He was of middle age and stature, and had served King Xerxes in Babylon and Susa prior to the accession of this young monarch. He was evidently devoted to Artaxerxes, seeing that there was some latent good within and beneath the fire of his Eastern nature. In Councils of State Memucan stood first, and had therefore much power. Artaxerxes was now too deeply in his cups to be in any wise thwarted. His hot Eastern blood was kindled as in a blaze, and Memucan, wise as he was in this matter, knew it.

"Sage Memucan," said the King, placing his signet

meanwhile upon the forefinger of the prince, "take with thee to the Queen's camp a goodly number of our bodyguard, and forty slaves withal, so that my consort Vashti shall thereby perceive there is some alarm in me. Go thither, and deliver unto her ears my command again. Say *this*, 'That I, *Artaxerxes*, ruler over a hundred and twenty-seven provinces in the world, demand her presence within this tent, and require obedience unto my word before the hosts assembled.' Stand, therefore, not upon ceremony; for if she again refuse, then constrain force, for I say, Shall not the King's decree be omnipotent? Covering all. Am I a fool and in nowise a king? or is my glory no more to be considered by my subjects? Go! and further hear me, for I will not drink again until I see thee return hither to me, neither will I eat of anything, so swear I by my gods."

But after a short space Memucan also returned to the royal purple tent of the King, and they observed in his train now walked Amitha, Vashti's mother, with a very serious expression of face, and much grief.

This aged princess was not of Vashti's stature or bearing. In her youth she had been famed throughout the cities of all the East for her singular personal charms, for she was a daughter of the house of Caria, and had commanded her father's Amazons against the Thracians. Now age had reduced her form somewhat, and set a dimness in her eyes; nevertheless, she still retained the indomitable courage and spirit of her race, that which had marked her earlier years, neither was the fire of her ireful nature in any way abated at times. Now came she forward in all her

dignity, and raising her bended figure up before Artaxerxes, contrary to all decrees, which prohibited such in women, stood awaiting the word to speak in the presence of that King, before whom she stood.

Not seeing the young Queen, as Artaxerxes had further commanded, and, moreover, the spoiling of his decree that if Vashti still presumed to thwart the majesty of his word, force should be the means of bringing about her presence in the tent before the whole host, he was more wrathful and fierce in looks because the Queen-mother Amitha had herself come to him in the place of Vashti his wife.

Before him stood the two giant Scythopolians, with massive axes, to destroy any whom the King might decree, on account of appearing before him, unless desired by him, even as this woman had done. Thus, however, did Amitha stand afar off, waiting the word to approach, lest she, being but a woman, with sufficient daring to speak before the King, whose passion was great, might meet death, in the place of any concession, on account of her daughter's disobedience.

When Artaxerxes heard from the mouth of Memucan, prince of the royal Magi, again the Queen Vashti's refusal to come to the tent unveiled and lowered in status to the level of the rude dancing women from Chersonesus, his passion grew worse, and he called his councillors nigh, while Amitha waited, still murmuring under her breath exhortation to Bel. Then as Artaxerxes fell into conversation with the princes as to the great indiscretion of Vashti's refusal, and the humbling of the King's majesty, Amitha prostrated herself and prayed unto Bel the

more, whose image she carried in her breast, hidden beneath her yellow *simmarre*.

"The great King Artaxerxes will hear thee, O princess," said Memucan, after a space. "Come and approach and speak as thou desirest, but with discretion."

"O King, live for ever," she said, as she stood between the guards, who held aloof their polished weapons by order of the King. "O King, *live for ever!* Thus hath my daughter spoken unto me, saying, 'Speak ye unto my lord the King, as from the mouth of his servant Vashti, whom he hath raised to great power and glory. Behold, the King's majesty and glory exceedeth all other kings of the earth, that his fame goeth around all the neighbouring cities and countries; that, like great Solomon of old, all nations do desire to witness my lord the King's greatness. Now, behold, the King, my lord and master, hath all in life that pleaseth the eye—vessels of gold and silver, purple clothing, and many rare spices and herbs, great and small chariots, and horses and mules, the number of which cannot be augmented for greatness. Ay, all hath the King that is proper to please the eye of man, according to both strength and beauty, in the lands. Then hath my lord the King his concubines, whom he hath *not* so highly honoured as his servant Vashti; yet these women are in the flower of their age, most comely and pleasing to the sight, for their hair falleth to the ground, and their garments are of Tyrian purple and gold. But, behold, am I Vashti, my lord's wife. I am neither concubine or slave, save unto my lord's grace himself, yet unto none other am I so. Therefore, if I, a great King's

daughter, and my lord's wife, doth appear unto the hosts assembled within the King's great tent this day in the shape of a hireling, and a slave in the eyes of the King's servants, shall I be no more a Queen, but a lewd woman, as a concubine; and thereby shall the princes, those wise men and legislators of all countries, look upon me, my lord's wife, with suspicion and with evil observation in future.

“‘ Thus send I my mother Amitha, who carrieth my message truthfully unto my lord the great King from our tent at even under the eye of mighty Bel.— VASHTI THE QUEEN.’ ”

And Artaxerxes called forth in a mighty torrent of rage, uncontrollable: “Go out of my presence, woman. Is man to be set at nought by the thing he hath raised and called from the dust. Go, lest the scorpion¹ shall be laid upon thee, notwithstanding thy years. Go, thou daughter of Ziph, and bear unto the woman Vashti my displeasure. Let her look not for to-morrow, lest in mine anger I destroy her from my sight and curse her in my wrath for ever.”

So Amitha returned to her daughter in company with the head of the eunuchs; but a great uproar was set abroad in the King's tent, for he would neither eat nor drink, and already lay upon the floor in a great passion, utterly drunken. But Vashti broke up her gathering, and returned to her palace, as a certain dread of the King laid hold upon her, and her heart was sore from fear.

¹ A small whip made from sharp prickles, resembling the sting of scorpions, such as our furze bush or any shrub of like nature. (See Josephus, book viii. ch. viii.)

She went forth, however, from the feast with her priests and most of her kin, and stood up upon the roof at the last wane of the moon to hear the noise from the King's vassals in the gardens. Her head was bared, and she loosened the sandals from off her feet, now in subjection to Bel. Tabotha her slave crept up to her silently.

"O mistress, wilt thou sleep?" she said. "Behold, the night wanes, and the scarabias are already on the wing."

"What wouldst thou, Tabotha?" she turned and asked. "Where are the guards? *Still* eating and drinking?"

"Now on watch, O great Queen; on watch."

"'Tis well." And she went below into the chamber where Belus the god stood in an effigy of gold and porphyry. Then Tabotha unrobed her, and set over her head a veil of great beauty, made from the plumage *fibra* of the *nostria*, a minute bird dedicated to the god himself, and thus did Vashti pray long in the silence.

Loud moans came borne on the heated air meanwhile, which gave place to dismal chants, so that she trembled and fell upon her face downward, greatly troubled in heart. Louder arose the strains, penetrating at length through the painted walls and the high columns that uplifted the ceiling, until she quivered painfully, detecting the portentous words that sank into her soul. For the priests of Bel were singing in the night air as she listened—

"O children of the mighty Bel,
Hail, hail, hail !

Comst thou nations here to quell?
Hail, hail, hail !

Thou who through the molten fire
Cleanseth evil from all ire,
Hail, hail, hail !"

So herewith she felt subdued, and anointed her head. Nevertheless, she moved not from her posture of humility again that night, but bowed herself in her misery until dawn spread its wings over the city.



CHAPTER III.

THE COUNSEL OF THE SEVEN MAGI.

NOW it was the next day, and the great feast was yet unabated. The hosts revelled on the fat of the land still, each country in separate division, so that their several customs might be observed to themselves alone, and to their own enjoyment, at the King's own expense. The Arabians sat around their compass, having their shields and spears of war of beaten gold arranged in a circle to apportion them off. The Israelitish men of war, and those of the master caste, served with the King's hired servants, yet not as bondsmen, despite being under dominion. The cedar hewers from the Lebanon woods came in thousands and revelled outside the King's palace — these with the artists from Tyre and Egypt and the weavers of fine purple. Fierce Syrians squatted, painted and beringed, in circles, some lying drunken upon beams of cedar, their helmets of brass serving them as drinking bowls.

Fair-haired Zidonians, too, carrying their goddess Ashtoreth in a silver ark covered with sycamore branches, held votive orgies, and filled the air at wonted seasons with their cries and protestations.

Worshippers of Anubis from Memphis, and lotus-crowned priests from the Nile, each sect revelling at the feast of India and Ethiopia, so that hence they might hereafter go, extolling Artaxerxes, on account of his wealth and greatness, like unto no other monarch.

The compass for the princes and the high court of the King himself was marked by a wide circle in the form of a gilded cage, the workmanship being of pure gold brought from the fields of Ophir and Sheba. The Grand Chamberlain's tent, the tessellated court of the princes, and the tabernacle for the Magi, with the legion of priests, according to their denominations, had all their separate spaces, as decreed by the administrators of the feast for the time being.

Through the great tent of the King that night the eunuchs softly trod barefooted, for he was sleeping, and the royal princes waited without at the rising of the sun, in case of being summoned at any moment, while the guards watched within. Aman the Amalekite entered at morn, as was his custom, to wait upon the King early, and to receive his commands ere the reception of the morning guests, and to deliver them to the certain officers of the provinces.

Despite the pompous state, the beauty of the hangings of all colours, and the inlaid couches of ivory and gold, with these at every entrance, the military satraps on guard, each satrap accompanied by his score of slaves, and without the tent were the mass of tributary princes—Artaxerxes still lay in the most voluptuous repose. An odorous perfume floated in the air, caused by the burning of the curious balm plant introduced by

the beautiful and famous Nicaulis,¹ who had journeyed to the court of the Jewish king Solomon in all the glory of a sovereign, and laid before him all the costly tributes most choice in her own land for his acceptance. In the distance was heard the sound of timbrels, sweet and melodious, for the youthful acolytes of Bel were invoking the god's aid, and passing a refractory heretic through the fire. Moreover, a petition had been sent early through the Queen that all priests and worshippers should supplicate unto Bel, that the King's heart might turn from the mandate he had issued concerning her the previous night; and if the god should desire a tribute of faith, a young heretic should be sacrificed upon the fire, as aforetime had been the custom in Babylon.

After a little space Artaxerxes awoke suddenly, and rising from his purple couch, went to the opening and looked out.

The chief eunuch supplicated himself low upon his face before him. But he was waved aside the while. Summoning his favourite Aman, he walked into the gardens with him.

"Behold," said Aman cringingly, "hath my lord reflected upon his word of last even? Yonder, the holy priests sacrifice unto great Bel. See! a goodly specimen, so that the King's heart may be inspired to relent his words. My lord *will see* to it therefore."

The Chamberlain's words were soft and suave, for

¹ Queen of Egypt and Ethiopia, and the "Sheba" of Scripture writ, who brought this balm as a gift.—E. L. C.

he knew the impetuosity of the young monarch,¹ and used his marked diplomacy; for it was known throughout the land everywhere that Aman the King's Chamberlain was high in favour at Court, and that his words were ever of weight in the King's mind. The words "*See to it*" had a marked effect, for Artaxerxes was in no better spirit than heretofore described. His brow was clouded strangely, and a torrent of unyielding thoughts concentrated themselves in his brain. He grew savage with an unwonted petulance. He had taken no sup of anything, for it seemed he was consumed with chagrin and uneasiness because of the refusal of his wife to comply with his command.

"Fool!" he muttered savagely to Aman, "did we ask of thee to speak? Cease! Where is the Queen this morning? Keep thine own counsel awhile."

Aman prostrated himself, and touched the hem of the scarlet border which fringed the King's mantle, and cringingly replied, "At prayers, O King."

"Still at prayers? Ah! dost she think that any god would decree otherwise than that which her lord hath spoken? By Bel, she hath soon forgotten her love unto me. She hath surely remembered nought of mine in refusing to add to mine honour, in that I desired the world to see the perfection of my Queen, for mine own royal word's sake also, the more shall I suffer it? Shall I suffer it to master me, this bitterness, and shall men go hence from my feast and my court, saying, 'Artaxerxes the Great bows unto women, and his word is nought with them, since he is as a reed with them'?"

¹ See Note at end of chapter.

Aman ventured to reply, "O King, wisdom is ever in all thy words. The seven princes of the Magi are in attendance now, as desired by thee; suffer an inquiry to be made this day into the matter of the Queen's denial and disobedience, wherein the King shall judge himself; for when the heart is heavy, the counsel of wise men is then admirable, and uplifteth the spirit to do the right thing—in needy times. O King, if this be accomplished, then shall peace rule thy mind and body."

"'Tis well!" he answered, still with unabated severity. "O Aman, thou art a wise counsellor and friend still. Come within with me, and bid the seven princes of my person attend me, as thou dost suggest, also summon my Magi to the throne. The wise Memucan can speak with me, for so shrewd a philosopher and alchemist as he, will understand and expound the subject commendably to his followers. We do need them, and according to the law they may decide, so ye agree thereunto, and we also. Come," and they went within together.

The great throne was raised upon a dais of blue and gold, set upon the heads of gigantic winged apes, made of finely beaten gold. A canopy stood above, from which suspended curtains of great beauty, woven from the peacock's plumage, so that they emitted shades of different colours under the gleam of a brilliant sun on this early Eastern morning.

Hither at once came the lawgivers and legislative princes, under their head Aman, by the order of Artaxerxes, to consult over the Queen's disobedience.

From this private state inquiry all foreigners were ne-

cessarily excluded. Those that stood around the throne were such as were, according to the law, necessary for the keeping of the King's dignity, and the seven princes of the popular provinces sat upon cushions close to Artaxerxes ; next to these stood others, having the papyrus of the laws before them, the seven wise men of the land, grave in garb and looks, being the Persian Magi, famed for discretionary power and inimitable foresight through generations in the past.

"Princes of Persia and Media," said Artaxerxes from the throne, "also my valued and tried counsellor, Aman, whom I have raised to much honour and dignity. O wise and illustrious expounders of the just laws of the land, ye of the Magi, I have called ye together over a concern that, although being my own personally, is notwithstanding a matter in keeping and common with thine own just dignities, inasmuch as that which is esteemed by me as works of thine, in honour and greatness, so likewise is my decree and my works, if agreeable and just, in like measure so to be esteemed by ye, all my servants. Thus, I say, are we assembled together this seventh day of my great feast to discuss the disobedience of our beloved and heretofore submissive Queen, Vashti, of the House of Media.

"Oh ! excellent, according to the ways of reasoning, ye wise administrators of the subtleties of many laws, upon whose words the kings of the earth bend their wills, we would settle this matter which weighs heavily upon us this day. Therefore, if any one of ye possesseth a slave, and doth issue commands for a certain

thing which thou requirest, behold, whether the matter be little or great, if so be the slave refuseth to comply to the will of her master, then sure punishment followeth, and perchance death. Now, in the question of mine own affair, the import is a thousandfold greater, inasmuch as our Queen, the princess of Media, hath disobeyed not only the King himself as a woman and a subject, but hath slighted our liege word, whereby all the earth shall laugh and speak scornfully concerning our said royal decree.

“Now concerning this I do care vastly; and yet mine heart is heavy withal, and my mind burdensome, because of the burning within my soul for the Queen’s grace and beauty; and that notwithstanding the cupidity of her ways, and her disobedience of the words as decreed to her, if she appeareth unto me now, rancour of spirit will depart from me forthwith concerning her, and in her sight shall I forget all that iniquity and affrontery she hath shown unto me, for thus in looking upon the Queen my wife shall I forget I am the King, and be but a man. Now, behold, I would that ye all interpret the law of this thing unto me, whether the Syrians, Ammonites, Zidonians, Amalekites, and the people from far and near shall depart and go hence, saying, ‘Artaxerxes hath no word in his kingdom, since with women his commands are scorned,’ or whether I bear out myself a King, and a wise ruler over everything, under my dominion as was and is transferred unto me by my forefathers. Now, thus it stands.

“And therefore I beseech that one of you shall weigh the matter over well, and expound each one to his fellow

lawgiver, so that peace and obedience shall prevail, and that the improvident urging of the senses be no more known unto me as it is, for I hereby swear that my fast shall not be broken until thou decideth the thing for me, and that speedily."

Then Carshena, third in rank of the seven, spoke to Aman a way aside. "This Median woman," said he, "sets the Court in great measures of extravagance with her wantons. Did not she deliver unto Gorgius, a high priest of Tophet, a false god, six hundred darics of gold, price for three hundred virgins to train up for the temple of Bel? And to Beelzebub, the great god of flies, also in the valley of Ekron, she sent a tribute for the protection of the young warrior Bala at the King's feast to-day. *She loves this Bala.*"

"The King's god also is great Bel, seest thou," answered Aman in a low voice while the wise men were consulting together, while Artaxerxes lay back upon his couch listlessly during the counsel, speaking nothing.

"That is all well," returned Carshena. "But casting aside the spirit of disobedience in the Queen, is not the daughter of Aman *also fair*, and serves in the refractory Queen's Court? What would the Grand Chamberlain say if the King took to wife Isis, the daughter of wise Aman, and put to death Vashti, as is just, for her slight of the King's word?"

Aman now started perceivably. True! he had a daughter noted for her beauty, but that aspiration to the royal crown itself should have entered his heart, he never dreamed until Carshena's ominous and

significant words fired him to the point. He glanced with his small eyes carefully around; his fingers twitched convulsively. "Isis, the daughter of *Aman the Amalekite*, a descendant of mighty Agag, become the '*Queen of Artaxerxes*,'" he mused within himself, kindled forthwith with a new and greater ambition than he had before experienced. He passed his hand over his thick, coarse locks, catching his red dyed finger nails, which were very long, in the tangled meshes of his hair.

"Silence, O Carshena," he muttered, looking around significantly the while. "Speak no more on the subject now, lest peradventure a word catches a treacherous ear. Thou art a wise man, my Carshena, shrewd and great. Canst think Aman the Amalekite is a fool then. Behold, I will prove how little. Come, therefore, and sup with us in our tent at even. My wife Zeresh shall minister unto thee, and our plans be discussed then. Come."

Carshena acquiesced, and cast his eyes aside momentarily, murmuring, "See, the King, O wise Aman, is drowsy. At heart he loveth the Queen, but he loveth the adulation of men better. Still, listen, wisely, for a word from the lips of the *faithful* Aman will turn the balance of a weightier matter even than that which insures the Queen her crown. Dost reason and understand? 'Tis enough, see to it, friend Aman, and I will join thee at even in thy tent. But peace, Meres cometh hither."

Meres, second unto the Prince Memucan, who was head of the seven, now came unto Carshena, and discoursed with him what understanding the Magi had come

to in regard to Vashti. And now for the space of near an hour did these men reason together, at the close of which the King arose wearily upon his cushions; and after gazing restlessly over the assembly, probably for the space of time they had been considering the matter, bade them speak. He further called the Grand Chamberlain to him, for he longed for drink at last.

“Call forth my cupbearer, O Aman, that upon the wise men’s decision I shall drink of the wine which Hermeus the Egyptian hath sent unto me, for it is stronger than the thought of woman, and then shall not Artaxerxes require oblivion when he hath no Queen? Call hither Haran my cupbearer to be here in readiness.”

Whereupon the leader Memucan stood up above the rest. His writers and the slaves of the papyrus, being set before him with the open reeds, carrying characters of the laws of the Persians, and also certain of the Median regulations, which had been modified during the reign of Cyrus, surnamed Xerxes, the good ruler, and father of young Artaxerxes, as being more consistent to the populace and its commingled orders than the usual severe code, attributable to the dynasty of the Medes and Persians of previous times.

Then spoke Memucan—

“O King, live! Light of the greatest empire of the world, whose greatness exceedeth the splendour of any king that liveth thereon, live for ever! Let thy word be exceeding great and powerful; let dominion be sealed throughout all lands, and over all people, from thy lips, through the excellency of thy wisdom

and majesty, like unto the illustrious and mighty King Xerxes thy father. Verily, thou barest love in general unto *all* mankind. Now as beseemeth us, the seven so called, humble and honoured Magi of thy kingdom, to be over lenient, and too greatly to the disposal of thy insurrectionary and less loving subjects; thus, O King, now do we, the upholders of the equitable and propitious laws of the lands over which thou rulest, come to a righteous conclusion, regarding the insult offered unto that gracious person of thy Majesty which excelleth all ruling monarchs upon earth. And call forth our several names, before the throne, as loyal subjects and servants, having pondered the thing well over in our minds for a considerable length.

“When, O mighty King, thou hast heard our opinion as that of a liege subject and servant in one body, unto a righteous benefactor, then shall we await thy word, and beseech that thou shalt in nowise be angered unto thy servants, but graciously submit us to kiss thy sceptre, as heretofore thou hast suffered us, before thy face.”

Then the seven prostrated themselves, severally touching the ground with their foreheads, previous to reading the judgment.

A gleam of impatience meanwhile pervaded Artaxerxes' face, and a petulant mutter escaped him. He signed to Aman for their arising, and to get the business over immediately.

“Call the names out to my lord the great King,” cried out Aman, peremptorily. “Call forth the number of those agreeing together, and also those who differ

in this question which the King desireth settled. Then let the agreeers first speak before him."

Memucan the chief, then advancing, delivered the names in the King's hearing as follows :—

"For the King's High Majesty, and judging the evil cupidity of the Queen as being guilty and worthy of death, 'SHETHAR, MARCENA, CARSHENA, ADMATHA, and TARSHISH,' five of the wise seven.

"DIVISION !—Those for the Queen's innocence, and disagreeing with the principles of judgment countenanced by the afore-said five—

"MERES and MEMUCAN, two of the wise seven !

"Whereas," continued MEMUCAN, "before the King, we, the Magi of the King's great Court, now assembled in the palace of Susa, the twelfth day of the month Adah, lay before the mighty Artaxerxes certain views concerning the trouble laid upon the King's heart at this season when the earth is filled with merriment. Behold, five of us, being the King's servants, have, after strict counsel together, and nice weighing of the whole matter in our minds, compared the act of disobedience which the consort of the great King is guilty of, with that of the laws of the land which altereth not : Whereupon, we further are constrained to admit, notwithstanding, the Queen hath faithfully abided by the sacred statute therein ascribed, that 'no woman beneath the laws of the Medes and Persians may or shall present herself on any wise to the stranger, save her lawful husband, uncovered.' She hath, nevertheless, set up a standard of great indiscretion to all other women in the earth, in that she hath, with great daring, set aside the commands of her lawful husband, in not following out that which was desired by him, he *being her master* : Whereupon, seeing that this is so, the certain ladies of high caste, with those also of all states throughout the land, will follow the example set unto them by the Queen herself, in ruling their lords, as quite contrary to the nature of all things living. For the small are subservient to the great, so the wife must be without laws of her own, save those instituted by her lawful husband."

["Thus, therefore, O King," saith Shethar, Marcena, Carshena, Admatha, and Tarshish, five of the lawgivers, "that the Queen Vashti hath given grave trouble to the prospects of the land, and in all lands which hear of the same, not only in dishonouring the King, her ruler and commander's word, in the presence of the whole host here assembled, but also in setting strife among the women of the land, who will justly and certainly follow her example, wherein their husbands can no longer be masters, but slaves."]

"And, moreover, it is clearly proved that Vashti the Queen hath also forgotten her affection unto the King himself, making herself a mighty feast, and entertaining her friends, so that in her heart she hath already forgotten the King her husband, and the honour unto which he hath raised her throughout the land. Therefore, O King, Light of the universe, and just Sovereign of the hundred and twenty-seven provinces, it is decreed by the aforesaid five that the Queen is guilty of a great and punishable crime, sentence of which rests in the King's mind *alone*, notwithstanding, is considered heinous enough to be worthy of that capital punishment which the law decrees, and which is death. Furthermore, the aforesaid five restrain their authority to decide the complete sentence in the King's ears, not only on account of the division of two, but that a lottery shall be delivered unto all of the seven, those for and those against the Queen's punishment, and the King shall judge from thence accordingly."

Artaxerxes now arose and motioned again to Aman. His eyes were very fiery with passion, for the words of Memucan the sage had filled him with intense emotion; and though the Eastern blood, hot and passionate, coursed wildly through every vein of his body, he was nevertheless greatly disposed to kindness of spirit and generosity of action. Again he

motioned Aman. "What is thy thought of the Magi's meditation?" he asked the Grand Chamberlain.

This man raised his coarse eyebrows superciliously, and as one deep in science and full of wisdom, answered: "O King, can all the admonitions of man bring sight into the eyes of the blind? or can herbs and invocations to the gods alter the decay of years in a man when the season of youth has passed over him? Therefore, can the wisdom of kings or the solicitations of wise words correct the mutiny of a woman against her husband, if it *be within* her? O King, behold the Magi can see *no* exoneration for the Queen, save that she shall suffer *death*, and thou shalt thereby give her crown, which she hath so slighted, and her dignity unto *another*."

"By the god of Babylon, ay, by the horns of Bel whom ye worship," cried the King, swayed by a tumult of remorse and rage, "it shall not be. Shall I set my royal seal to destroy that which I have loved? O ye, Memucan and Meres both, speak ye yet again, for ye shall stand out and state the terms that *ye* two agree unto, before I will do aught. I will have *no lottery* against the Queen my wife. I will accept no report until I am assured of the rights of such. Neither will I pass by the law itself until I hear the reasoning of the two who hold not with the rest in this matter, and adjudge less severely. Therefore, O Memucan, liberty is given that thou shalt deliver unto us also thy opinion. Stand forth and speak."

"Death to the Queen Vashti, O mighty King," answered Memucan, prostrating himself upon the purple at the King's feet, "is *not* in our hearts, though

great provocation is rife in thy soul; and further, in the minds of our relative administrators, set by thy clemency over the just laws of the land, because of the Queen's great fault and indiscreetness, that will cause the whole land to marvel thereat; nevertheless, O King, we, rightly adjudging her guilty of *this sedition* against thy royal word, do also attribute her unworthy death, so irrevocable a punishment as to be cut off from life or contrition, though the fault be most heinous; for consider the clemency of the mighty and illustrious Xerxes, in whose footsteps followeth Artaxerxes, whom all the people as greatly honour, and so stain not this goodly feast by the sight of a frail woman's blood, and the ignoble death of the Queen, thy royal wife, who too cometh of a great stock and of so warlike a province, that the peace of the land may be thereby disturbed, and great danger come upon us hereafter, if the thing is done unto her."

The man's voice quivered as he spoke; and as none else were permitted speech, the words sank into the King's heart deeply, so that he dropped his eyes to the floor, while a silence reigned throughout the tent. The words of Memucan had appeased him, and his countenance grew solemn, for he became sorrowful in heart. He motioned him aside, speechless.

Then Memucan and Meres the two withdrew again and consulted with their fellows; while Aman the King's counsellor again spoke to the monarch.

"O my lord the King," he said, "I perceive now sorrow is upon thee, because of thy love for the Queen. Where hath she proved unto thee the same? for mine eye seeth it not."

"Where, O Aman, is there, I ask of thee, any in the land who can appear like she is unto me? Ay, behold, I *am* heavy at heart; for I have it in my soul to forgive her; but for my word's sake, and the carrying of this thing throughout the world, I *cannot* pass it over. Vashti! Vashti! where is the God whom thou hast half taught me to serve, that I am so forsaken and heavy of spirit?"

Then he covered his eyes in the linen folds of his head-tire and wept. Springing again after awhile with fierce impetuosity to his feet, he shouted through the tent, and with all the majesty of a monarch uplifted his sceptre: "Disperse ye all. Ye of the Magi, to your tents until the even! Ay, *I will* ponder thy words in my heart. Break up the feast, and let it be known that Artaxerxes refuseth furthermore all gaiety, eating, and drinking to take place in Susa the palace this day. Make it known—send forth the heralders with the edict, also the trumpeters of our court with the guards unto the camps without our space, to the Syrians, Egyptians, and the Barbarians; also disperse the nation calling themselves Jews from their work; and let those appointed by the mighty King my father thus say, 'Artaxerxes suffers *no woman* to set his word at nought, for he decrees the feast is ended. so that he may better consider what decision he would arrive at and what punishment.' Thou Aman of our Court, attend us, and at even shall our decree concerning the Queen our consort be determined."

Like silent mutes, the assembly made their way from his presence. Only Aman was left beside the King, who now lay prone upon his face, irregardless.

The issue went forth over Susa, amid great surprise and some dismay and murmuring, while tributary monarchs eyed the thing in a strange light. For, "Hath not a woman worked this havoc, and set in turmoil as great and mighty a gathering as was ever known?" Nevertheless, arguing, they departed and returned to their countries, awaiting the climax.

Note.—It is generally presumed that Artaxerxes at this epoch * was not a young man, but this undoubtedly is an error paramount through illustrations; for, upon the authority of the ablest historians, we learn that Xerxes the Great at his death distributed his kingdom between his sons, two of which are only mentioned, viz. Artaxerxes and a younger brother. Both these princes were young men; and Xenophon, with great accuracy, depicts the fight between the two brothers for the throne of Persia, and the death of the younger, but a boy, upon the battle-field. Thus leaving Artaxerxes sole master of Persia, and a man scarce in his prime. (See Morris and Harrison's *Xenophon*.)—E. L. C.



CHAPTER IV.

THE WISE MEANS.

"AND the Magi have been brought to consider," said Aman later, when the King's mind had grown more easy, "O mighty Artaxerxes, and ordained that the Queen shall *not* die (though all men pronounce her guilty of a greater crime than that of violating the laws of the land, in that she hath made violation of the law of nature, by the resistance of a woman to the lawful pre-ordained divine power of man). Wherefore can we see the danger of like insubordinate women rising against us. Behold, now the Magi hath most rightly urged, that Vashti shall be set aside in place of death, which truly was not in my lord the King's heart; nevertheless, that she shall go hence into her own country in the instant, and be no longer the King's wife, for her misdoings' sake."

Artaxerxes bit his full lips. The repudiation of the woman whom he most loved sank heavily into his heart. Amitha, the Queen-mother, had indeed waited at the palace door these several mornings, bearing messages from her daughter; for, "perchance, if the King will see the Queen, his heart will relent," she said. But he sent out Aman, who sternly bade her hence, and trouble the King no more with solicitations, but to

return to her country. Vashti now stood in very fear of death ; all her father's court had returned to their own land, even Bala, who had protected her ; there was none to fly to save her priests ; and for the sake of peace and safety, if she dared, she would have journeyed to the great Temple of the god in Babylon, to have sought his presence, and craved a manifestation of his favour there.

But Artaxerxes was stoical, and refused himself even the sight of her ; therefore if death came to her, she must be sacrificed as an example to the rest of her sex, as urged formally by the seven wise men. Yet he yearned in his heart for Vashti, notwithstanding several of the Magi, in conjunction with Aman, contrived to prove to him the fallacy of this. Moreover, if a new wife be sought for the King, Isis, the daughter of Aman, surely would be also within first scope of his choice.

"Well, so be it !" at length he answered, as he drew himself up proudly. "Behold, I will issue a mandate on the instant for Vashti's return to Media. Unto thee, most wise and adroit Aman, whom I repose with confidence in, I give the decree and place my signet ring upon thy finger. It seems to me thy diplomacy and thy presence even awes the people more than the name of Artaxerxes *himself*. Tell me, therefore, what remedy hath the Magi considered equivocal for the extermination of the Queen? Dost any one of ye think I have no heart in my body?"

"O King," returned Aman, having set before him a writing of the scribe Bygtha, whereon was inscribed the decision of the seven, now agreeing to the repudia-

tion of the Queen, and also that a new one be sought to take her place, "here are the depositions of the servants of the King ; and if my lord passes the same, then shall emissaries be sent out to-morrow throughout all the land, and gather together not only the flower of the lands afar, but in the kingdom around the palace, and without. O King, behold shall I decipher the words written thereon?"

The King inclined his head, whereupon the Chamberlain read from the papyrus :—

"The seven wise counsellors of the Mighty King Artaxerxes, to the Ruler of the hundred and twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia, we thy servants send greeting. Thus do we inscribe our united decree, as humble servitors to the King's majesty, awaiting the King's judgment thereunto, according to the sin committed by the Queen Vashti unto the King's gracious Majesty, and the slighting of his royal word and favour, it is judged that the King will be pleased to appoint in the place of the said Vashti the Queen another, so that in the excellence of the King's new choice shall he forget the late Queen, and be no more cast down because of his royal word's sake. Furthermore, that not only shall the King choose a consort from the royal ladies of Persia, but that he shall appoint ambassadors to go forth into every country in his vast empire, which ambassadors shall bear the King's livery and seal, empowering them to choose whomsoever they shall please, and consider the fairest of the women, among every class, and bring the same unto Susa the palace, for the King's pleasure and discretion, with the rest to take stand.

"When the number of virgins have attained to three hundred, there shall be the limit for the King's choice.

"This decree being weighed over with great consideration, it now behoves the mighty Artaxerxes to reinstate another in the place of Vashti, and that her crown be given to a right and a more favourable woman.

"Signed in writing by those present at the issue of this decree, thus—

"From the seven wise counsellors, being the Magi of the land judi- cating the laws of the Mēdes and Persians. }	MEMUCAN,	
	MERES,	TARSHISH,
	SHETHAR,	ADMATHA,
	MARCENA,	CARSHENA,

"(Signed) AMAN THE AMALEKITE."

"And liege servants of the great King.

"Witnessed by Aman, the King's High Chamberlain,
and signed thereof by him in the Council
Chamber of Susa the palace, at noon, in the
month of Lous."

"Now, O King, the papyrus only requireth the royal
seal for the working of the thing, if it findeth favour
with thee. O speak and live."

"It goeth against me, Aman," he replied; "and,
perchance, if I stay to think, then shall I repent me
altogether. See ye to the thing, and let me not look
upon the Queen, for her beauty consumes me, so that
I am a small thing in her sight, and have observed
none hitherto to please me as Vashti. But *ye* shall all
see the thing done."

The edict went forth throughout the lands on the
following day; and Vashti, now repudiated and cast
forth from her greatness, made ready to depart from
the palace with her slaves and her women folk.

It was early morn next day, and the King went into
the gardens, as was his custom. He was alone and
gloomy. It seemed as if a canopy of darkness was
set over the sun of his existence, and he was exceedingly

sad. As he passed later among the mimosa and gathered the myrtle blossom, a slave came hurrying forward and fell before him, overcome with great fear.

"O King, great lord of the earth, *my mistress!*"

"Of whom speakest thou?" he asked clemently.

"Of the Queen, my mistress Vashti, the illustrious and beautiful princess of Media, O my lord! Behold, she hath seen thee in the garden, and delivereth this, that I should bring it unto thee most speedily."

He looked upon the Ethiopian calmly, yet apparently unmoved, although innately he was troubled. The Queen's gardens were but a *cannah* in distance from the King's wall, and of sweet cane,¹ and he had not thought of her watching him. His consort's white palace arose in the midst of this garden. The slave, a man of immense stature, had now set a basket before him, wherein lay specimens of all the fruits grown in the Queen's space—lemons and sweet golden apples, the choice pear, with the quince, and many luscious figs. Moreover, upon the surface the Queen had strewn flowers which she knew Artaxerxes loved, and his favourite myrtle. This delectable gift, with her own ring which the King had given her, she sent forth; "perchance," she said, "if it touched her lord's heart, he might relent and be constrained to forgive her, even at last."

He turned a moment from the man, probably not so much to summon hardness of heart as to think of the past, when Vashti, the peerless Median, had so won his heart, and he in like measure oft had sent her

"Sweet cane," a sort of sugar cane or sweet salt, alluded to in Jeremiah vi. 20.

costly presents and spices like unto this, which came now from her own hand with supplicating meaning. He thought of her again in her garb of white linen, bordered with golden fringe, standing among her women, her fair, long hair surrounding her like a cloud of golden glory, as he first saw her, and his soul fretted because pride levied a duty upon him, lest he should forget his word.

The slave kissed his sandals reverently, and Artaxerxes turned speechless, less than the King he was.

"O King, glory of great Bel, my mistress is exceeding sad at heart, and quitteth Susa the palace at even this day. What word shall thy servant carry unto the Queen herself, who waiteth in the garden thy slave's return? Must I depart without such?"

Then passing his hand over his brow, Artaxerxes answered with some softness, "Well, Ethiopian, return; go again to thy mistress, and say that the word of the King *is given*, that the law is decided against both she and me, and that I am no longer master of myself separably. Go hence, I say, and wait with me no more, for I must depart to mine own."

The slave arose immediately and laid both hands upon his forehead, just as there came from the Queen's palace the voices of her many women, soft, melodious, and voluptuous, filling the air around.

The King started, and a shadow of pain contracted his features. He knew the Median woman was now near, and in her presence all seemed circled by a dream, upon the clouds of which he walked. There she came yonder through the pomegranate grove,

with thirty Thesprotian slaves from Edessa, carrying the beautiful grass, long and luxuriant, which the god of the Thesprotian marsh had blessed for its proverbial power of healing both mind and body. These sang sweet strains to their own Deity, while they waved to and fro across the Queen's way the sacred grass, which was some twelve or fourteen feet in height.

Artaxerxes felt weak in body and soul—the Ethiopian moved slowly away, for he knew more was afloat than anything he could touch upon—there was a biting sharpness at the King's heart ; he was now absolutely alone. Yonder his eyes fixed upon the beautiful company, coming in the midst of them was Vashti herself, whose beauty absorbed him, and he loved her ardently still.

He thought he was now at the shores of fair Malabar again, watching the beautiful women of the land come down to the sea and dip their white sandled feet in the water. Then the coral caves came before him, and reminiscences of the luscious white wine of Kishna, which once intoxicated him so. All grew upon his memory as the voices of these women coming hither filled the warm air around him with odorous dreaminess.

He gasped amid the concord of sweet sounds, the like of which never had he heard before (for Vashti had given great sacrifice for the presence of these women to move the King's heart as a last resource in her extremity and misery). She came before the entrance to the King's garden, and stood there. In her hands she held some myrtle sprays, and the tresses of her hair were also bound by the same. She

was clothed about in yellow Tyre cloth, signifying sorrow. Around her loins, encircling her, was a small bodied serpent of great length, stingless, and charmed by her priests, to impart unto her greater subtlety ; her brows, deeply pencilled, were tinged with henna, and contracted across her nose ; while her eyelashes, of the same tint, lay upon her cheek like a fringe at every downward turn of the lids. Tabotha had painted her cheeks delicately with colouring, and also her lips, and fastened chainlets of gold to her arms and ankles. Now as they stood without the canes, the King's eyes became riveted upon her, and he trembled within him. It seemed to him that the world held none other but this one woman in her great beauty. Long he had been penitent, and had yearned in his soul to behold her again and recall that decree, but the awful portent of his word had restrained him.

Vashti herself in very truth loved him not. It was the loss of her crown, position, and good name she resented so deeply. To return again to her country repudiated, discarded, and disgraced galled her high pride, and her heroics anent her modesty broke down before her injured dignity. And thus she sought to waylay the man over whom she knew she held undivided sway, who upon the sight of her would but lightly esteem his word, and reinstate her into her pristine glorious position at once.

Artaxerxes now leaned himself against a palm trunk growing in the way, and was powerless. Between the conflicting thoughts concerning his wife came those decrees urged by the legislators of the land ; so that he grew fearful in her presence,

and could neither retrograde his steps, or shut out the sight of her from before him, neither bid her go.

"Ah, Bel tortures me!" he muttered, vaguely, and I am consumed in the fire, burning—or is the God whom my father served bringing me this reflection in the voices of the air? If so, what am I? What am I in the body of my weakness? What!—ho!" he shouted, as though by a mighty conquest over his nature, he would make some effort to shut out both the visions now before him and his wavering spirit. "What!—ho! Guards of my body, ay, where is my friend and counsellor Aman that he does not seek my presence in these very chains?"

But, strangely, as he spoke the Chamberlain drew near; for this man had been wily enough to secrete himself a little way off, adjudging that Vashti, the Median woman, would make some overtures towards the King if she saw a loophole of chance.

"Here am I, O King! Aman is here."

"Ah! timely, Aman, now indeed. 'Tis more than well. Behold, I am beset with snares, so that my soul fainteth because of my weakness. Why hath mine orders concerning our late Queen been disregarded? Look through the canes and see. Look! That glorious company there."

But Aman saw nothing, for the whole of them had swiftly departed, leaving only the aroma of the spices from their garments in the air. Yet he set his blackened teeth fiercely in the nitron he was imbibing, for he knew all. Then he returned to where the King stood, saying, "Fear not, O master. A

worse thing than that of the Median woman's departure troubleth the land, and injureth the peace of this throne, O King, and for which am I set stedfast to seek thee concerning. Think not of the woman now."

"How so? What nation is foolish enough to barb arrows against us?" returned Artaxerxes, recovering quickly his wonted ire and regal discipline.

"No *nation*, my lord," answered the Chamberlain suavely; "*no nation* whatsoever, but that refractory host who compass the land, and set themselves up into conspiracy bands to dethrone even the great King and mighty Ruler over us. Heresy, ay, insurrection, is rife amid these very fanatics. Hither come I with the import, for it is expedient that a council be formed under my lord the great King's sceptre at once to inquire into this matter, that the eye of the God of the Tower may judge before us and for the land."

"Ay! it is the Jews again—these people. This nation the Jews," answered Artaxerxes. "Who is it leadeth this race against even *me*, O Aman? Never was the like during the dynasty of my father I say. And surely, as my soul liveth, desire *I* no harm to these people, providing they conform to our laws. For my father's sake alone do I desire justice in heart be done them. Who doth raise them up as insurrectionists in our lands?"

"Old superstitionists, O King!" returned Aman, with emphasis; "merely old codes and ancient laws formed by those presumably living before the building of the Egyptian pyramids. All myth, the creeds of the ancients, which none can claim inheritance to save

my lord the great King Himself. Justice, therefore, is the portion of rulers like unto, and wherefore it surely beseemeth thee to acquit righteously the people of the land under thee. Behold, the unphilosophical Jews arise now masters over the rulers which diplomacy has most justly assigned to keep them in subjection; neither do they even the work set them by the governors of the provinces under their masters; but in place of bowing humbly to such decrees as are consistent to these stiff-necked heretics, do they deride statesmen and legislators of the King's High Court, the military chiefs, ay, the name of the great King himself, because of the selfishness of their nature; since they are neither contented themselves to work, nor possessing that humility in bowing to their superiors, which benefitteth all other lands and people in like condition, at this present."

"Hath any one of these people kept the public distinctions which Xerxes my father allotted unto the several who had merited his favour?" asked the King, as they neared the doors of the Council Chamber.

"None, great King; the exaltation was too high for such as they. They became as demagogues in their several positions. Letters, O King, came to me from Babylon, as also by the hand of Xixo, from Jerusalem, saying, 'The Jews colonizing at this place are rising against *the King's* greatness.' This was the space of sixty days before my lord the King's great feast. Bands of these so-called Jews and heretics are assembled in the plains and byways, extolling the God whom they see not, but worship, and conspiring together to

be free from the rulers which are set over them, nor are they faithful to their masters in any shape, rebelling against the dogma issued from thine own lips, O King, unto me, Aman; wherefore I set over these people toparchs, one for each province, a hundred and twenty-seven provinces, not accounting Susa the palace, wherein my lord dwelleth. Under each toparch two governors were apportioned to rule, and subjectionary under the two governors, six state tax-masters for each province. Whereupon, at even yesterday, came the chief of the tax-masters, bringing one Issachar a Jew hither, who has banded together a horde of seditious others; and so great was the offences of this band and their corrupt and wicked urgings, that the toparch, Aristeus of Babylon, was constrained to send out a legion of the guard to destroy the party, which was done accordingly, only this man 'Issachar,' their leader, is retained and saved alive to wait the King's leisurable judgment at this place."

Artaxerxes was silent awhile; his countenance was overspread by a dignity and thoughtfulness well characterising the mental state of his mind.

"Have they this Jew, Issachar, in Susa?" presently he asked of Aman, who eyed him with a wonted peculiarity, for he observed that Artaxerxes was wavering, and those feelings of clemency innate within him would, if allowed to reflect rationally, both pardon as well as perchance investigate into the affairs of these Jews, who had attained such notoriety during his excellent father's reign.

"Yea, the Jew is brought hither," he returned,

somewhat eagerly, "also important evidence of his evil towards thine own royal person, which is ever endangered by the secret spies these refractory miscreants set about in order to work their own evil agencies," continued this man, cunningly. "For, O King, the deification of the Majesty in the royal person, as well as for the greatness of thy name and kingdom, trouble ye no more concerning this race of infidels; but appoint a distribution of power unto such an ONE, but *one* person alone under thy sublime body, to rule second only unto thyself. Thus has it ever been; for the cares of so vast a kingdom, although headed by a wise and equitable King like unto thyself, are weightier than is consistent for the mind of one person, inasmuch as such things as conspiracies, rebellions, seditions, and the like should not compass the mind of a monarch, but should devolve upon a lesser man, whereby the King's mind shall not be taxed, but only entertain those nice matters which promote power, and the happiness of my lord the King's heart in general. Let the King live, ever preoccupied alone by the love of the Persians and the good subjects of the land, whose minds are drawn ever by a disinterested devotedness unto him and his safety."

Now they came together unto the council chamber, and Aman bowed himself at the King's feet. His shrivelled hands clutched at his red cloak over his bared breast as he looked up supplicatingly at his master.

"O Aman, my faithful counsellor, where is there in the land any like unto thee? Attend me at even at the palace, and hear my decision concerning thy sug-

gestion, for I will this day *appoint* a second ruler over the land under me. Ay, by my gods, who shall take in hand power to administrate my laws as from my own mouth, so that I fret not myself because of these matters." And they separated thus, and the King went to his own seat.

"Bring the Jew before us," said Artaxerxes, having taken his throne apart, and the several officers of state in their wonted capacities around him. It had suddenly entered into his mind to hear the deposition of this man himself; for, prior to transferring a portion of his power unto another, he desired to have some manifestation of the evils declaimed by Aman now to be paramount in the land, and so judge primarily.

Issachar was therefore brought forward.

An aged man appeared, whose white beard extended to the loin cloth covering him, for his limbs were bare and begrimed with dirt, his face was thin and haggard, and his eyes sunken deeply into his hollow cheeks. The soldiers having stripped him on his entrance into Susa, he appeared now a miserable unkempt object, more in aspect like unto an animal hunted by merciless pursuers than a human soul, and a man of long years in life. Deep, half-healed seams lay upon his back, reminiscences of the terrible scorpion with which he had been beaten; from his matted, grizzled locks dripped vinegar and some powerful liquid, smelling like unto ammonia, down upon his open sores, whereby he winced pitifully, struggling to free his hands meanwhile from the cords which bound him tightly, that he might tend to mitigate his pain. At every movement he evinced suffering; the guards struck him

sharp blows again from their spiked whips, until he fell upon the pavement writhing in extreme agony in the midst of the congregation, unable to rise or support himself.

Then the certain rulers began talking one to the other, and petitioned the King to exterminate these people (of whom this was a specimen) at one blow throughout the land. But Artaxerxes said nothing, but looked upon Issachar strangely where he lay.

Speaking to the Grand Chamberlain, he said, "Why is this man in such a condition? Raise him from the earth."

"These people are become like unto this," returned Aman. "Rather than do the tasks which the taxmasters apportion them, do they live upon the wild corn and berries around, and catch the honey from the rocks. Moreover, O great King, this very man brought with him a secret poison wherewith to make rife the King's existence. Behold, these heretics extract poisons from the fangs of the serpent, and this—this very man, carried unto Susa the palace for the destruction of the King's life a certain portion, but his wickedness was discovered."

Then the hot impetuosity of Artaxerxes was fired mightily. He arose, and held forth his sceptre in a great passion, thinking his life had been sought. "Take out the wretch then," he cried, "and deal with him as any of ye please; forthwith hath Artaxerxes done with the Jews for ever. Hitherto hath my heart been soft and my mind uneasy over those whom my father exalted and cared for. But now, behold, how our excellent friend and counsellor Aman careth and watcheth over the

interests of the throne and our land generally. Forthwith, then, shall Aman the Amalekite alone rule, second in the land ; unto him do we apportion the rights of jurisdiction. His chariot shall be of gold, and his garments of Tyrian purple. Also shall he wear like unto us a crown of gold, in token of his great dignity, because he hath saved us by *this* witness. On the morrow let emissaries go forth throughout our nation declaring this, for the just laws of the Medes and Persians altereth not, neither does the word of the great King which he hath spoken. Take forth the seducer of the just laws of my fathers, the murderer of his benefactor, and hear ye all, that whatsoever our under pontiff Aman the Amalekite *shall* command, it shall be so done, and whosoever hateth this, hateth also the King, and the King's voice shall be obeyed. Let none in the earth come unto me for ruling. In future standeth Aman ; and therefore this day, and for thirty following, shall the heralders go forth and proclaim, ' This is the reward which the King Artaxerxes, of the hundred and seven-and-twenty provinces from India to Ethiopia, will bestow on every one whom he loves and esteems worthy of honour. Aman rules for his King, and therefore shall the people go unto the said Aman for ever.' "

At the close of the young King's words, the aged Jew leapt up and cried out in a piteous voice of terror, " O King, live for ever !—This charge is false against me *utterly*. I am as a blade of grass driven by the wind ; the God of my fathers heareth and knoweth this, for is not Aman the enemy of our race and *our* God ? O mighty Artaxerxes, if I call with

my latest breath, now therefore so hear me, clemently. I am a Jew, but buffeted, scorned, and derided—I am a man, yet hunted, beaten, and lacerated like unto the beasts of prey; but no word of the charge is true against me, for we are all innocent offenders, desiring only our *just rights*, whereby we suffer unto death for it. Hear me! hear me!” But the confusion of voices and the King’s excitement drowned his words; he fell now upon his sore knees, covered his face with his tangled hair, and cried aloud in agony, “Mercy, O King, mercy!”—A crowd of soldiery hustled him out into the square of the metropolis; there he afforded sport for the followers of “Bel”—the populace. As Aman appeared upon the terrace and gave the word for his destruction, thousands penned him in their midst, while wild shouts and shrieks rent the air as they pressed upon him to the death.

So Issachar the Jew died, and at midnight they found him lacerated, disjointed, and limbless in portions of the city; the spirit from the flesh was parted, but the latter fed the birds of the air that night.

The King’s mandate went out on the day following throughout every province, and emissaries also set out to the plains, so that the tribes of war should understand the full extent of the decree of Artaxerxes concerning the elevation of Aman, as aforesaid. Also, that day were distributed in three’s to every city and town, connoisseurs of beauty, and ambassadors from the metropolis of Susa, to choose from every place as many youthful women, to the number of three hundred for the King’s discretionary choice, as they could see

were available to pass before the chief eunuchs of the palace. And it was further agreed, that the whole contingency should be gathered together in Susa on the ninth day of the following month, Gorpiceus or (Elul), as recorded by the Jewish historians.



CHAPTER V.

CALLED.

~ X DURING the reign of Xerxes, that ruler whose every act is worthy of the highest commendation, Mardocheus, who came of the stock of the governor Benjamin, held a certain position as counsellor in the Court of the King ; and not only was he constituted to decide matters justly, being endowed with exemplary wisdom, but he was also a firm and zealous upholder of the first faith, for he followed in the constitution of the aged Nehemiah, and became then so worthy of note, that upon the death of Nehemiah he was considered qualified to stand in the Court, greatly encouraged by the King himself, for in the city of Babylon Xerxes then held a high government, and his principal palace also was situated within that city.

Great age creeping upon the sagacious monarch, instituted the removal of the Court to the metropolis of the Persians at Susa. Years of incapacitation followed, the first symptoms of this renowned King's general decline. Yet Mardocheus stayed in Babylon still, only at wonted season taking his journey to Jerusalem for tribute, as was customary, according to his taxation.

The Jewish community at large was at this time in that vast principality of the Fire-worshippers—"Babylon"

—hundreds, however, had returned to the new-walled Jerusalem; and for the space of four years, since the late King's death, had again persecution beset them most rigorously.

The young King Artaxerxes knew little or nothing of the nation intact which his clear-sighted father had uplifted and befriended. He held himself no distinctive creed. What little religious experience was his had departed since his marriage with Vashti the Median, who was a strict devotee to "Bel," and he had been constrained to follow after the same strange god. In apportioning out certain governors and toparchs to his hundred and twenty-seven provinces, he persuaded himself that his people were rightly represented and ruled; for it was agreed that the toparchs (princes) were proper men for deciding the matters concerning their provinces, and thus the King could lie at his own ease, and not be troubled about the State.

Thus it chanced that the commissioners of the Magi came to Babylon, according to their directions, to discover within the city the choicest of the eligible young women therein for conducting to the King's harem prior to presentation to the King for his royal distinction and honour.

The daughter of Mardocheus sat weaving fine reeds for parchment in her own chamber, in the seventh hour. She had on a loose garment of white, bordered with fine blue linen, and a girdle of the same on her waist. A little barrel of ointment stood beside her, for her kinswoman Zillah was a helper of

the afflicted, in dealing out medicines and salves for her people, as many as desired and came to the house of Mardocheus for such healings and kindness.

Hadasseh, known as the young daughter of the scribe Mardocheus, was very beautiful. Three years in passing has set a different aspect upon her face; and now her form was full of perfect comeliness, and her countenance was unlike any other maiden of the great city, so that it became known that Mardocheus the Jew possessed a daughter whose equal it would be difficult to find in the land around. Moreover, Hadasseh carried herself with great dignity, and her kinsman was choice over her because of it. She set herself to expound his writings and decipher the characters inscribed upon the various parchments and skins that came to him from the Jews in different countries, therefore she grew up with amazing talent, and became to Mardocheus as his right hand.

Terrible as was their situation at this epoch, and great the fear of annihilation at the hands of their officious persecutors, Hadasseh, communing with Mardocheus, grew faithful unto the just ruler of their destiny, and kept herself within doors, lest any evil should come unto them because of her. Arion, son of the toparch of the city, had seen her on one occasion placing a gift upon the grave of her kinswomen near the river bank. Whereupon the young man sent a servant to inquire concerning her, and it became known at last that he loved her. Arion therefore set himself over the certain tax-masters of the eastern portion of the city, and made interference with those

under the scribe Mardocheus's employ; but meeting with resistance from the Jew himself, Arion determined to make matters still harder for him.

The toparch's son was unsteady, overbearing, and unfavourable; and after applying to Mardocheus for the hand of Hadasseh in marriage, he, being refused, became tyrannical, and swore eternal hatred to the family. Moreover, a secret fear was afloat that Arion had other more dangerous projects regarding the maiden in view, therefore it was hazardous to journey out.

As Arion arraigned himself more rigorously to persecute these Jews than before, day by day came tidings of some fresh calamity, and fresh devastations. Children in the bloom of youth would be found mutilated and destroyed in the ditches and canals around. Young men, strong lusty workers one day, would be the next lying dead at their work, and what redress had they? None! Though they petitioned the great King; though they sent messengers up unto the High Court, it availed nothing. These never reached Artaxerxes, and he revelled in oblivion as to this harassed and now bewildered nation. The only thing he heard was evil of them, as conspiring malefactors, whom he had now given over unto the discretion of heathen masters. Mardocheus had charged Hadasseh, therefore, to stay in the house, for the words of Arion had disturbed his mind, notwithstanding he knew she was safe under the shelter of his roof, and as yet he had not disclosed to her their proper relationship.

For a Jewish maiden to wed a worshipper of "Bel," a devotee of the statue of gold, and a man who possessed two wives in Babylon already, was a thing

repugnant and horrifying in thought. Notwithstanding, Hadasseh was now seventeen, marriageable, and of great fairness and discretion—but Mardocheus waited.

It was very early that morn, and she sat looking now and again upon the horizon, where arose the red sun in its refulgent glory. Mardocheus had not yet arisen, and he was later than was his custom. She put away her reeds, gathered up the ointment into pots, and set them ready for use. Then she smoothed her head, and put on her little ebony sandals, to breathe the air in the garden while it was silent day. This garden was the only area in which she walked, cultivated to the front, and looked upon one of Babylon's greatest squares in the distance.

As Tharra, the chief of the three emissaries who had come to Babylon from Susa the palace in quest of beauty, walked into the square (for he had been down to the riverside to bathe), his eye alighted upon Hadasseh as she stood gathering up the tendrils of the vine that had blown into her pathway beneath the trees. He noted her glossy hair braided upon her head, also the fairness of her skin, like unto alabaster, her rounded limbs, and the beauty of her countenance (as she turned without her veil, and not seeing the stranger) to where he stood watching. She plucked the flowers with her slim fingers, set them into two separate bunches, which she then dipped into a little spring running through the shrubs. Tharra's gaze became more intent upon her. Surely Babylon's "*fairest daughter*" was here? "This maid *must go* to Susa! and shall be sought this day!" Thus

Tharra contemplated, whilst the girl was still unconscious of her keen observer. He was close to the hedge of mimosa which parted her from him ; but his slave hastening to where he stood with his cloak, caused her to start and gaze with large affrighted eyes through the bushes, for she then discovered the strangers. It was the work of a moment. As her eyes met those of the Persian emissary, having no veil upon her head, she fled with greatest speed into the house, leaving her flowers strewn upon the earth behind.

"Whose house is this?" inquired Tharra of a slave hurrying from one of the courts at that time.

"Mardocheus the scribe's," returned the man, "a servitor at the late King's Court was he, but now no one knows him apparently, or his particular calling."

Tharra passed on, reflecting. "Twelve more maidens only were required now for the King's grace, and this must be one. The Magi had said '*all that* were likely,' no matter of what nation, providing they be comely and favourable in all ways for the King's particular choice."

"Daughter," said Mardocheus, as she entered, "why this haste?" for she trembled greatly.

"My father, I have seen strange men without our garden watching. Thus I have hastened within for fear, lest it be some who come hither by order of the toparch. One looked very strangely at me, and they are verily strangers unto us."

"Why didst thou go out uncovered thus?" he questioned.

"It was early, the sun is only rising. I went to gather flowers, and thought I was unseen, and the air invited me so."

"It was indiscreet," he said; "but, come, I have something to say to thee after the meal. I have had a strange and troubled night for the revelations which hath been shown me, of which after awhile I would speak freely."

The Jew truly seemed much discouraged and perplexed. He was unusually silent, though Zillah pressed him for the cause of his distemper; but he said, "Credit it not that my heart is heavy because of *weariness*; rather is it sorrowful for the oppression of the enemy, because of the dead in the city already, and the crying out of our nation over tribulation and woe as it does. But there comes to me even in the darkness of night reflections, ay, wonderful commands like unto consuming fire from heaven, Zillah, and I have gathered the meaning deeply in my heart to ponder in quietude to-day."

She looked at him silently, half-wondering, yet she ventured not to question him much, for she knew his mind, and how he continually was held by the power of the Infinite, and that his revelations were strange.

"Brother," she said, "is it also our maid Hadasseh that troubleth thee, inasmuch that she is within the toils of the evil one of the city, and we are so poor in strength to encompass her in safety within our midst?"

He looked a little sternly into her face. "Where is the faith of thy race, O Zillah? Thinkest thou that I am not assured the Mighty One of Israel will deliver us all in His time? I say, the child will *not* wed with the heathen, the hater of our race. A decree hath gone forth now from the land wherein our God dwells, that same which came unto me in the night.—Leave

me to reflect, for I would ponder the thing awhile. See there, hither cometh bound some already from the plains. Go, attend them, as thou knowest so well, and leave Hadasseh unto her God and me."

"Ever was there good in thy lips, Mardocheus," she answered meekly. "Peace, brother, and the holy blessing."

She went out into the court of their dwelling, calling the youthful Hadasseh to her, who came speedily with a servant, carrying the measures of meal and the cask of ointments, as was her custom.

Several of the poor water-carriers and brick-makers had come up for the salve and for a portion of Zillah's brown meal, which she gave out to them daily. During their afflictions many had sought a word with Mardocheus, as well as help from the aged, kindly Zillah and her beautiful kinswoman. Some described to her pitifully how they, *i.e.* certain of the tribe of Judah, had yesterday suffered much 'maltreatment from those rulers who were hired to set them work. How they had received no price for their hire after; and when asking their wage, were beaten so sorely upon the soles of their feet and across their knees, as to prevent their kneeling at work or standing for the worship of their God. Moreover, Arion had crucified two of the house of Joshua for insubordination that month before the walls of the city. Then they begged that Mardocheus would journey down to the river-side, where lay the dead; for unless he would give them his assistance, would the tax-masters order the bodies to have ignoble burial in the Tigris.

After awhile came two elders sparsely clad, with fresh terror depicted upon their countenances. These inquired for the scribe on the instant, whereupon Hadasseh sought him upon the roof, whither she knew he had gone to pray. As she stood beside him overlooking the vast city, with its beautiful outline and foliage, they observed three strange figures making for the dwelling entrance. These were sumptuously arrayed, as befitted some envoys of importance to the city, and further, wore the royal purple. The young girl caught the arm of the scribe beseechingly as she gazed upon them.

"Dost see those men, my father? See, coming!"

"Ay," he answered calmly.

"'Tis they whom I spoke of this early morn, the one who looked upon me. Why, why are they coming hither now?"

"My child," answered Mardocheus, "be calm. 'A daughter of Israel' knows not fear. These are from the Royal Court I perceive, and perchance bring unto me some commission; but 'tis strange this time in the day, and this new King knoweth me not. But have no fear. I pray the God of our fathers to watch over thy youth and future; though of this latter I am perplexed, for what hath been shown me I scarce yet can read. Come, then, veil thyself, and go down with me into the court to meet them, perchance."

The two elders told of an irruption out west of Babylon, where the hewers of wood for the Temple of Bel were made to work from the rising to the setting of the sun for the thirtieth portion of a *gerah* a day. The tax-leviers had beaten severely one of the women,

a plucker of opobalsamum, whereupon the men were fired with deep indignation, and setting fiercely upon the tax-master's "whipper," killed him upon the spot. A conflict then took place, amid much affright of the women and children. A levy of the guard came forth, headed by the Captain Arion, who cut down as many of the oppressed Jews as came within sword reach, except the few who fled at last.

"Now," said the two elders, falling into lamentation; "now, O Mardocheus, the plain is strewn with our dead, with none to bury them, so that the foul birds will make food of our unhappy people ere night fall again. Alas! alas! captivity like unto the days of old has again come upon us, and we shall all die, for the heathen rules again uppermost in the land."

"Friends," said Mardocheus, "why not be of better cheer? These are but days of tribulation for some murmurings which hath displeased our God; but the day of our deliverance from the enemy is not far hence, believe me, and be of comfort, notwithstanding."

While he spoke, came forth a servant, saying, "Three emissaries are arrived from the King's great court of Susa, and desire speech with the master of the house; they stand waiting in the entrance."

Then the scribe turned to Hadasseh and Zillah, and looked upon the former contemplatively. "It would be desirable that thou shalt stay here until my return," he said, "and give unto these elders some repast; for I will return hither shortly again, and talk with them further on their matter, when I learn the strangers' business with me. Hadasseh, my daughter, go bring me my zohar, also my girdle."

She brought them to him, and went with him to the curtains before the opening of the room. Then she knelt and kissed his garment, while he blessed her, kneeling before him in her childlike humility.

It was but a short space that she and Zillah talked with the Jewish elders, listening to their fresh woes, and evincing keenest sympathy for them. Hadasseh set before them some wheaten cake and a cluster of figs, also some of the quince wine to cheer their spirits, while they again assured them how the sons of the tribes still stood proudly by the plough, and the daughters gleaned, though they were fugitives in the land, and the oppressor's rod ever upon them. Labour was great with them, and the days of toiling waxing harder and heavier. Yet had not their forefathers existed upon yet more bitter fare than that, for acorns again might become their own portion; "though we be called a rebellious people, our sufferings are soon forgotten, and the measure of our woes undiminished, whether we bow down to the idolaters or no," they murmured.

They were much embittered on account of the force of their wrongs. It was tribulation that almost hardened them into this bitter murmuring, as help seemed afar off in this vast band of idolatrous ones. They were without a King *themselves*, a vast congregation having no ruler or leader to the earthly eye; and they were being slain like beasts in hundreds, for this very stubbornness and pride of heart.

The Jewish maiden could only speak to them the words that Mardocheus had taught her, and deliver to them his own watchword of *Faith*. It was hard that

a great nation who bowed down to a thing of its own structure, a massive lump of deformed ore, shaped into an idol of their own creation, whom they called *God*, should have dominion over the flesh and spirit of the *living* God. Hard to fathom this as a just and necessary dispensation in the life they lived.

But shortly Mardocheus returned. He now called Hadasseh to him, and his face was greatly changed, for he was very quiet. His eyes shone with a strange light, so that they looked upon him full of wonder; and as he spoke, the words he uttered, with their tone of sadness, sank into the hearts of all, as though they heard a spirit from the shades. "Come with me, my daughter," he said, looking upon her. "Come, *thou* art desired; it is the Voice of the Highest alone hath spoken it, and thou must obey, as I saw in the still of the night. Come! it is the same."

She calmly walked to him, as though she knew the portent of his words. Her eyes looked very beautiful, and a tranquillity spread over her face, as of divine inspiration. It was enough that He called her, and she knew it. Zillah and the elders looked on half in fear and surprise; while the scribe, in company with Hadasseh, departed from them and passed through the opening.

He took her into an upper chamber facing the east. It was a small compartment, which served as a zeticula, wherein were arranged all the appurtenances for writing—reeds, papyrus, and zinc, dissolved for tracing; also upon the walls were the twelve great signs of the zodiac. A little flight of stairs led up to a look-out upon the heavens above, and here it was

that Mardocheus was wont to study in silence, oblivious of all the lesser world.

They were now alone, and he said to her, "God hath sent for thee, my daughter, to do a great work for Israel. Behold, messengers have come, the chief of which chanced, through the Almighty Father, to look upon thee this morning. Ah! have no fear therefore of these men now, my child, but learn that they desire thee to accompany them unto the metropolis of Susa, that thou mayest be presented before the King, favourable and worthy to be the great King's wife. Wherefore, let thine heart be cheered, and listen to my words. The Lord God decrees thou shalt go unto Susa; and if so be His grace goeth with thee, then shall come about a great and mighty thing for Israel. Dost understand? These men acquaint me that Aman, son of Agag the Amalekite, is highest at Court now, and rules under the King in the land. Ay, but, my daughter, this same man hateth our race and people, hateth thee and me, also our just and great God. What shall Hadasseh *do now* for her people?"

She uplifted her face, calmly resigned, to his. Her lips moved: "Thinkest thou that I, a Jewish maiden, shall wed with the King of the *heathen*?" she asked. "A heathen!"

"If God ordaineth, yea," he replied.

"And, oh, my father, must I go hither with these men alone to the idolater?"

His face grew soft, and he laid his hands upon her head, saying, "Not alone, not alone; for God, and that kinsman whom He hath given thee, will go with thee into the strange land. Before we go down to



**"WHEN THOU HADST NEITHER NEAR KINDRED, OR HOME,
I TOOK THEE INTO MY HOUSE AS MINE OWN."** [p. 85.]



these men I have somewhat more to make known to thee; also would I conjure of thee to keep the words I shall say within thy heart with great silence, which are these, and now give ear unto me: The space of sixteen years ago I dwelt in the city of Jerusalem, a counsellor unto the good King Xerxes. Our people were also dwelling in peace, secured from evil, and then under a righteous discipline. My position at Court brought me considerable wealth, and there also lived with me my wife and two sons, since passed into their rest. I had also a kinsman of a just order, a wise man; he had been long a sojourner in Egypt, and I had not seen his face for many years before. But he came to Jerusalem during the Feast of Tabernacles, and journeyed unto my house to die."

The girl looked at him wonderingly, but he continued—

"Yes; on the eventide of one Sabbath day he passed from the body, and I buried him in the valley, near the palace of David our King on Zion Hill. But he left thee, my child, a babe, unto my charge. He was thy father; and thy mother, who was of the tribe of Dan, had died in the strange land, but thou wert brought a young child to Jerusalem unto my house and care."

Hadassch spoke nothing; the sudden disclosure of her birth seemed to mystify her beyond the power of speech. Mardocheus meanwhile continued—

"When thou hadst neither near kindred or home, I took thee into my house as mine own, and thus hast thou since ever been unto me. Now, my sons

dying left me with none save thee; and surely never have I had one regret that mine heart yearned to adopt thee whilst yet an infant, and art now grown up unto womanhood.

"Great vicissitudes have beset us since. Fourteen years have we sojourned in this city, already endeared to us because of the earth that covers the bones of our people and our own. Trials grew upon our daily life, followed by persecution, for the Fire-worshippers and those ruling over us under the King have *coveted* our just possessions, and have taken them from us, and left *us* nought. Now, O Haddasseh—still my daughter, be not troubled or perplexed because of what I have said. The Lord God ruleth! For now hath a mighty thought in the spirit been conveyed unto me concerning thy future and ours."

"Of thy handmaid, my father?" she asked him, softly, incredulously, and curiously.

"Peace, my child. I would it now that thou shouldst call me '*Father*' no longer, though still a father shall I always be unto thee. Nevertheless, for the sake of our people, and the great work of the Lord in thee, awhile I would have thy race or thy birth known to none whatsoever."

"How can this be?" she inquired.

"Thus," he replied. "In Susa the palace will be assembled three hundred virgins from every province wherein Artaxerxes rules. Among these shall Haddasseh the Jewess stand, and in accordance with the rules of the Magi shall she be put before the King, in due order with the others, that the King shall choose from them a Queen and a wife. Now, there-

fore, I say, shall *she*, Hadasseh, receive from the great King's hands this honour alone, whereby she shall raise up this young man's heart unto great goodly feeling to our people, and not evil, as heretofore, and also shall she frustrate by these means the base works of Aman the Amalekite unto us, who are his enemies."

She sprang to her feet, and stood up resolutely, a light of fervour upon her face. It was as though she had heard a divine command herself from on high breathed through the lips of this just man ; and without questioning further, she stood up ready to act, willing to journey, though her youth was delicate, and her strength as a captive small, among the mighty hosts of "Bel," in a strange and voluptuous land.

"O doth thy heart speak this thing, and shall I also do it?" she asked. "Tell me why thou hast so great an urging to lose me? O my kinsman, am I no longer then as thy daughter, though nigh seventeen years of my life has been in thine hands and thy house, and thou sendest me forth with no sorrow because of my mission?" The words were uttered with reproach, though she knew her work, and read the decree Mardocheus had showed her readily ; nevertheless, so young and fond a heart quailed, even at the going forth alone to her pompous though bitter fate.

He smoothed her glossy hair softly with his hands, and soothed her as gently as a woman might.

"God our Father shall deal with thee rightly, my child, thou light of my eyes. Do not think Mardocheus will suffer thee to go thither among the heathen and

the wicked *alone*. Now, would I expound a wonderful thing in thine ears; but, I fear, these men who await us will care not to tarry long in suspense. Behold, from henceforth Mardocheus the Benjamite is '*kinsman*' *only* to Hadasseh. This shall be before the eyes of men and strangers, but in heart still is he as a father to her, and she to him still a daughter. Come with me, my little one, below to these emissaries, these men of Ethiopia, and have no fear, but like unto wise Judith so shall my child be, for the working of Israel's deliverance! Harken!—when these men shall have departed from our doors, and even again has closed in, I will speak more unto thee of that which was shown me concerning thy future in the night; for as the Lord liveth, believe I that no word shall fail thereof. Therefore, fear nothing; for when thou shalt depart from us for the metropolis of the Persians, be it *whensoever*, Mardocheus and his house goeth also to watch over thee. I have spoken, O Hadassch, so fear not to face these men with a firm eye, for they are to seek thee, and will find thee ready, ay, *eager* to go with them! Come, therefore, for they wait us."

The eyes of Tharra and his fellows kindled with admiration at the sight of the Jewish maiden as she, owing to their peculiar mission, unveiled before them and disclosed her fresh beauty. Her face was calm and dignified in expression, however, while a ruddy glow mounting to her cheeks gave her a fairer appearance to them than before.

"How old is this maid?" asked Tharra of the scribe, "and what is her lineage?"

"I am her kinsman," answered Mardocheus, with dignity, "as aforesaid unto thee, she hath *no* others. Her parents died while she was a babe, and her birthplace was in Syria."

These matters, with others, were duly recorded by the emissaries, who commissioned that the maid should be ready to depart from Babylon with them for the royal seraglio in Susa on the morrow.

She watched their going from the window, and saw their fleet horses speed far from sight, while she grew full of thought concerning all these things.

Zillah also came unto her and kissed her hands and forehead; "for my brother hath told me," she said, "that thou art 'called' to do the Lord's will!" Then Hadasseh was overcome awhile and wept, while the aged women comforted her. She was but a young nursing, leaving the flock wherein she had been sheltered long, and the spring of her loving nature was swelling to overflowing within her. Only to-day, for by the morrow will Babylon's vast squares and towers be left behind, and the quiet house wherein many peaceful as well as pain-laden days had been spent. And her portion henceforth will be the ways of the stranger, and the home of the heathens of "Bel" her sanctuary, amid the turmoil of an ambitious Persian dynasty.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FLOWER OF THE LAND.

GREAT was the wonder and excitement paramount throughout the land because of the three hundred beautiful women who were early to assemble at Susa for the King's choice. The like had never been known before. These were collected from all parts and the loveliness of the East brought together. From • Egypt and Tyre and Athens (noted for fair women), Israelitish maids and prince's daughters from every state around, all invested with a candidature to stand before the young King for the vacant throne of the repudiated Vashti.

The diplomatic state of the whole land was still a pitiable one at best. Artaxerxes himself ruled a principality of Fire-worshippers, unto whom he had himself gone over at this very epoch. Though he had once himself led the army against his younger brother Cyrus, and had been victorious, yet these people were full of an unyielding self-sufficiency, fierce passions, and complete hardness of heart, urged on and goaded further unto wickedness by their leaders, the principal of which was the Chamberlain Aman, who hated with a seeming ferocity intense the nation of the Hebrews, dispersed so among them. It was with the most

bitter animosity that the followers of "Bel" looked upon the ceremonies of religion, and the "laws of Moses," which these harassed and captive people, labouring under most peculiar hardships, kept unrestrained wherever they existed in their midst. Only those already preserved together in that sacred re-edified city Jerusalem knew a certain peace, and even that was scanty enough. The Pagans took no heed to their antiquities, no reverence was paid to their long-standing creed of fortitude, nor no respect paid to their laws or ceremonies.

It was alone the vital energy of the Jews as a nation that maintained their national greatness. They ever possessed one unity of purpose. Many had gone over unto the heathen, it was true, but this was primarily through their terrible and successive political slavery, their continual degradation, that threw them over to moral debasement. It is the fascination so prevalent in evil example. Here were women slaves sold at auction chambers to the Kurds and Thracians; here were men absolute polygamists, spiritual virtue, holy ties, and moral influence wholly unknown, and as wholly unthought of.

Since the good Xerxes has gone down into his grave, affairs throughout Persia had assumed a more terrible aspect than ever. New laws were instituted, wholly adverse to those made by the great and wise progenitor of this rash young King. Now were Jewish temples again coming under destruction; priests being destroyed at the very altars; profanity rife throughout the land; while strange and beautiful women, worshipping strange gods, came hither, and

thus the scattered Hebrews groaned once more 'neath the heaviest of persecution and trial.

Nevertheless, Artaxerxes ruled, as a mighty master, Sovereign over the one hundred and twenty-seven provinces, and his Majesty was so great within the land that none other durst come nigh unto him, though he governed idolaters. Nothing was wanting to make up the magnificence of the "Great King." His treasure was unlimited. He possessed all the greatness and splendour of his forefathers, though he lacked their wisdom and jurisprudence. The mandate, therefore, now issued throughout Persia, declaring this monarch was willing to take from among the women of the land a wife, providing he be pleased with the candidate, no matter whom she be, can scarcely be wondered fell in these darkest ages upon the women eligible with the profoundest awe.

From the highest in the empire to the most humble, curiosity and amazement worked havoc in their midst, for ambition and desire's sake alone. But the Jews scarce heeded. To them it mattered little what wife the heathen King might raise to his throne. Their state was irrevocable and irretrievable. Behold, no Judiths dwelt among them now strong enough to go forth against so mighty a nation; and what woman's hand could break down the proud stateliness of this high and God-forgotten empire, and deliver her crushed people? None!—not one.

Thus, too, once had Mardocheus thought. The woes of his hapless brethren had sunk deeply into his

heart; for he had not overlooked the murders of his kindred and the general massacre of hordes without bitter enduring pangs and indignant righteous ire. But now a change came upon him, and he had been shown marvellously the means of preservation.

"Shall Israel be exterminated from off the face of her Maker's earth? Shall Aman and his followers issue decrees to slaughter them in the future, in order that he may work his own ignoble ends on the good earth—he who openly accuses them of evil and conspiracy to King and country, and will hear from them no redress?"

A voice coming borne on the air, soft, firm, and decisive, spoke unto him in the evening shadows, "*Nay, nay, O Mardocheus, my servant!*"

Then he started to his feet and looked around him. He was alone in his chamber. With breath withheld, and eyes gazing stedfastly ahead, he still waited and strained his ears to listen, as though some unseen spirit was swiftly passing by him, breathing into his ear the word as it hastened onward, "*Nay, nay!*"

Then he cried out aloud, and in a voice full of faith and joy murmured, "So be it done, O Lord my God, as Thou hast spoken." And after calling Hadasseh, the two sat together again in the silence, and he bade her listen to what concerned her.

"On the morrow," he said, "we shall journey to the great metropolis together, therefore shall we not look upon these walls that have long sheltered us more. That is nought, for another destiny awaits both thee and me. In Susa, my child, remember, I shall still watch over thee, not that I go because of mine own fear, for

thee, or taking unto myself any undue aggrandisement concerning mine own ability or strength ; that and all I have belongeth only unto the Lord ; but that it may be for thy comfort to see my face betimes when I can gain access unto thee privately, and that in the land of the godless I may be nearer unto thee than ever. For, oh, mine Hadasseh, behold no strength of my frail body, nor words of my mouth, could in anywise save thee lest God our Deliverer be with us, and I am verily assured that in going forth to this thing prosperity will crown thy works. Forget nothing in the King's palace.—Forget no word of the Lord's ; for even as I spoke unto thee, calling thee hither, hath God spoken unto my heart the word that we shall not fail—*not fail*. Now, O my child, before we go down unto the priest for a blessing and an anointment upon thy going out, I will expound unto thee a dream which the Lord God of Israel sent unto me in the night season of which I spake ?”

She lifted up her eyes to scan his face, for she could scarce detect him for the darkness overhead, but she repeated with calm wistfulness, “A dream, O my kinsman ! How so ?”

And he answered : “It was this.—And methought I stood upon the wayside, which the sun lighted and made glorious, so that my heart was joyful because of it. And, behold, there sprang up a very little fountain of clear water, which flowed along most joyfully ; and while I yet looked upon it, I saw a great dragon, whose fierceness was such as to even destroy me instantly ; and I trembled awhile, until, lo, I found myself changed also into a dragon. Then came on

the great dragon I saw with a loud cry, filling the earth with his tumult ; and methought while we fought together the whole earth grew dark, and horrible cries arose as from every nation thereon, so that the terror was so mighty as though God had visited the earth with death. But suddenly a cry arose from out the little fountain, and our great God heard it, high upon the firmament of his glory, wherein the light broke in through the darkness, and the sun rose up brightly ; and, behold, there was a mighty flood from the little fountain, compassing the earth, and the voice of the lowly became glorious, and those who were exalted become instantly debased."

When his voice sank, she asked softly, " And dost see the interpretation of this dream ? "

" Ay, my child, and my heart hath pondered it deeply. Now it telleth me that our day of vindication hath come nigh, for the working of all these things are to be in thy hands, O my daughter. Therefore, in the strength of the Light of Israel go unto Susa the great palace, for it is shown me how the interpretation of the dream shall come to pass in that place."

" And the interpretation, father ? " she asked again, meekly.

" Not now—not now. When the great danger comes, I will show it unto thee. Let us go hence unto Joachim to prayers, for the time wanes."

And they departed in company with Zillah to worship on their last eve in Babylon the mighty, and yet the fallen.

Some weeks after these doings great concern pre-

ailed in the metropolis of Susa. The stipulated number of emissaries had duly returned, each bringing deputations of strange women, the fairest specimens of youth and beauty throughout the whole empire. Many of these, inspired alone by the fascination of lofty prospects, had readily abandoned the homes of their habitual affections, left their gods and families, for the consideration of another woman's vacated crown, and the whilom dignity of one who had been cruelly ignored and isolated for conscience' sake.

The palace to the east of the city had been made in readiness for their reception, each woman according to her specified rank receiving suitable apartments therein. Thus—"To the daughters of kings" were given three chambers and a garden to walk in ; unto the daughters of princes, as secondly, two allotted chambers, and a stradium of ground in which to take the air ; the rest were permitted one chamber apiece, except the virgins of the city and of the worship of Bel. These were apportioned a roomy corridor together under the guard of three of the King's slaves. Thus Hadasseh, coming within the third category, merely as a Babylonish maid of humbler origin than many, was apportioned a small chamber overlooking the city, and a stradium of the palace grounds for her recreation space. At even, it was among the statutes of discipline laid down by the chief eunuch Gabatha, that the three hundred young women, after bathing and anointing themselves, should attend the Temple of Bel which stood in the garden for prayers and sanctification ; for if so be the King's choice should fall upon any one of these, it was requisite, therefore, that



she should be an observer of the rights of "Bel," who ruled in the King's heart, and was his god.

Nevertheless, Hadasseh, known as the "Babylonish maid," despite her hailing from the mighty arena wherein was set the image of the great god himself, refused to go with the others, or to uncover her face to the priests, or any save the eunuch set over her, as was compulsory. Vain were the protestations of the grand masters of the palace. The maid, looking stedfastly aloof, refused to share the rights of their worship, and thereby the overseers were troubled concerning her, and even reported her inconsistency to the palace of the Magi and to the Grand Chamberlain Aman.

These important functionaries came unto her, and expounded the need of obedience to the decrees of the god who ruled their King and nation. But, notwithstanding, she evinced no alarm, and bade them leave her; "for," said she, "if so be the great King shall find a wife from out the two hundred and ninety-nine, shall I then go forth in my creed and my body free as heretofore."

So while the bevy of beauty went forth daily from the palace to the music of lutes and cymbals, and bowed themselves in the temple of Bel, the Jewish maiden, whose lineage was not known to them, remained in her own chamber, yet oft would walk in her little space of ground while the others were absent to reflect. Thus was Mardocheus afforded a sight of her, if so be he would walk without the high gates which parted off the palace wherein she rested. Through the rails he could look each day; and she, moreover, sent him loving

messages through Barnabazus, who was once their own servant, but who had got into the service of Tharra, second eunuch, so that he still might see and serve indirectly the young Hadasseh for his former master's sake.

So these women, after their several rites of customary observances, were duly presented daily before the King. Yet he chose not one. The beauty and the remembrance of Vashti, it seemed, still lingered in his mind. Of the high born, none pleased him. Among the foreigners of distinction he saw not one such as she. And there remained at last, after the space of some months, but seventy left to take their stand daily before him ; and he had seen the fairest of the women without one single desire to place either one or the other upon the throne of that Vashti whom he had recklessly lost and loved.

Aman, his friend and counsellor, crafty and treacherous, was almost his chief companion. To this man, in his troubled thoughts and his despair, he gave up absolutely the reins of government. By the King's spacious palace now was reared a marvellous structure, another palace of porphyry and gold, equal to that of the King's, where Aman dwelt in splendour. Here paraded the captains of Aman's hosts, the Grand Chamberlain's soldiery, the friends of the King's slaves. Here was Isis, Aman's daughter, famed for her beauty, yet not allowed to stand in the eunuch's palace with the other women, but brought hither to her father's house at even on every day (for hitherto the young King had not seen Aman's fair daughter ; but it was known that three days from hence she was

apportioned to appear before him like the rest); and perchance when he saw her unveiled, and knew her name, he would be constrained to wed her for Aman's sake, whom he loved well.

The Grand Chamberlain's diplomacy was unbounded, however. He gave the King no trouble. He was invested with most absolute power, and accordingly made the use he desired of this power with the governors. Groans now came up from Jerusalem, from all the cities around, bitter calls for help from the Hebrews. Never did these reach the ears of the King. But Aman took upon himself the means of their destruction, and sent forth the slayers to do their murderous work among them; "for," said he unto Zeresh his wife and his elder son Abinöe, "I will not rest until my vengeance is appeased upon these scurillous people, who fought and slaughtered our race in the past. Now hath our god Bel given them over unto mine hands, and I will work their utter destruction."

Consequently, he appointed his six sons captains over the army, in order to further his own vengeance, and the whole community was in tears.

The lamentations of the Jews came to Mardocheus in Susa, where he now dwelt, but he was helpless and alone in their midst. The faithful Barnabazus kept watch. He brought tidings to Hadasseh of all their woes; how evil again had gotten hold of them; and how so many had already gone over to the strange god of the heathen, for the very love of dear life itself.

Thus passed the time, until it drew near for Hadasseh, the Babylonish maid, to take stand with

the rest before the King and his ministers. And she shuddered ; but for her people's sake, and for Mardocheus her uncle, she lifted up her heart and took courage whilst she prayed.

She continually walked in the space they gave unto her ; for there, with yearning eyes, she could scan the high-barred gates which parted her from her kinsfolk, and she loved to think they also watched without for her.

Thus she sat one even alone, beneath an olive tree, pondering, her eyes straying over the blue Tigris. Her veil had become disarranged, perhaps more by her own disinclination to the heat, for the air grew hot and sultry. Her white tunic fell in smooth folds from her shoulders, revealing her small bare feet, and for the while in solitude she forgot all around her, looking now ahead into the firmament, with prayerful lips. The white linen slipped from her head over her shoulders, showing her beautiful features framed by a cloud of glossy raven hair ; and while she thus sat upon the marble stone, thinking, inhaling meanwhile the aromatic perfumes of the garden, a figure came forward and stood irresolutely before her, in an attitude of calm respect.

It might be one of the eunuchs again, yet she did not fully understand whom it was. *This* very man had appeared before in her reflective moments thrice in her sight, and she naturally had accounted him an attendant of the King's women, but now in the shadows he came again. Why had he followed her thus ? He wore the sign of a great man upon his face, and he was of dignified stature, yet he wore also

the garb of a servitor, though a look of command shone from his large eyes, and he came ever alone. He seemed separated from the rest, wholly unlike, yet never in company with any.

Hadasseh knew not how long he had watched her as she sat there uncovered before the glowing red rays of the sun ; but he disturbed her by a sudden movement, and starting to her feet, she re-covered her face quickly.

"Art thou one set to watch me?" she asked of him calmly—"and one of the King's servants?"

He answered her softly, "Yea, I do watch thee, because *thou* art as the sun, that draws its source of water from the mighty ocean whether it will or no. O light of women, who sent thee hither among the rest? and why goest thou not to the temple to pray as the other women assembled do?"

She looked curiously at him. "Thou, serving the great King as a servant, to know not that I carry no allegiance to the god of the Babylonians?" she said. "Thy god delights in meat eating and great sacrifices, but *my* God delights in the honey from out the heart, and the sweet incense therefrom, in secret alone."

"Who art thou?" he asked, drawing nearer, and fixing his eyes upon her form, standing thoughtful and dignified; "who art thou?"

"I am out of Babylon," she replied calmly. "Behold, the chief eunuch of the palace, Gabatha by name, knoweth. I am one of the 'Three Hundred,' yet it is customary for me to take my stand as least of them before the King ; but why ask of me this, seeing I am not a King's daughter?"

"Because, O fairest, I am set to watch with thee. Nay, go not within yet."

She had started, scanning his face again earnestly.

"Ay," he continued, "I have passed through this portion of the palace daily. I have witnessed the other women at their feastings, their desires ; and while they revelled in the concord of sweet sounds, I have given myself over to this thing for mine own advantage, and yet——" He hesitated, while she stepped forward a pace, and seemed to scan the lineaments of his face as he stopped.

"Did the great King then set thee to do this portion?" she asked. "Art thou—thou—Aman—our—persecutor?"

"I am neither that thou thinkest of," he replied. "Yet, behold, I serve thee, whom I see fairer than any in the assembly to-day, thee only, and I set myself the task—*myself* alone."

He seemed to devour her with his silent eyes. And she, perceiving him by his garb to be merely a servant, felt little alarm because of his inconsistency, though he might be set to keep guard.

Then he said, "From Gabatha, the chief of the palace, I hear thou art to go before the great King to-morrow. Art thou not fearful? 'Tis a mighty thing."

"Nothing born of earth is to be feared," was her reply ; "none save '*He*' who organised the mighty world and the myriads of things wherein man maketh to himself '*gods*.' O man, who art thou that questioneth me thus, and by what name do they call thee here?"

"To-morrow thou wilt know," he answered slowly ;

"for to-morrow the slaves will anoint and adorn thee according to the Persian custom, then into the great King's chamber wilt thou be conducted. Among the number therein assembled *look for me*; and when looking upon my face, remember then how I am thy slave and not the *King's* longer."

"*Thou my slave!*" she asked, almost breathlessly. How so? Does not thy soul quake lest *he* whom thou dost slight thus shall hang thee up as a malefactor? Ah, keep silence, O man, for I cannot have blood upon mine head, and I am none of any account in the land to endure this. I am but a stranger. Depart from me, for thou troublest me sorely, even by what thou dost eschew as goodness unto me. Go, go hence, lest any secret spy shall see and hear thee, and the great God whom I serve will bless thee for that which thou sayest good concerning me at all times. Leave me, I pray thee, now."

The man spoke nothing further, for in the distance Hadasseh espied the returning procession from the Temple of Bel. He only caught the edge of her linen head-gear, and put it to his lips, impetuously. Momentarily affrighted, she gazed at him again. Who was this cunuch?—this man wearing the King's livery?—who cared for none, and in whose fiery eye burned this passion and strange resolution and daring.

As he stooped to kiss her bordered hem, Aman the Grand Chamberlain drew near at that moment. He wore a mantle of finely-woven goats' hair, bordered by a fringe of blue and yellow, and upon his head he had a toupet of tigers' ears, under which his own dark,

greasy locks fell in ragged dishevelment upon his coarse neck.

The eunuch, however, stood silently looking upon the intruder, while some invisible but marked change came over the Chamberlain's demeanour. He came forward cringingly, as though he stood before a mighty scion; but almost the next moment, when the man turned upon him with a look, Aman cried out to him peremptorily: "Dog, why comest such as thou hither in the absence of thy chiefs. Art thou set over this woman? If so, why do I find thee in the posture of solicitation? Eye of Bel, I'll see that the King shall know of this treachery, and thy body perchance shall hang upon the city gallows for insubordination ere long, for I *now know thee* to be one of the garden keepers."

Hadasseh's eyes grew full of pity and sorrow. It was a hard fate for even this heathen servant beneath cruel Aman's rule, for she knew she now stood before the arch enemy of her race. Behind him came the apple lance-bearers of the Court, which only the King and the second in the land were permitted to hold, because of the distinctive dignity it implied.

Then the gentleness of her nature grew still softer, and welled forth because of this innocent man's danger. What had this wretched governor done, but only kissed reverently the hem of her garment? She, but a poor captive in a strange uncertain land, surely it was a small offence; yet this high functionary made more of it before her and the slaves around.

"This man, my lord, has done nothing amiss," she cried piteously, yet full of distinct command. "He is

in the great King's service, and I swear has neither forfeited allegiance unto the King, or uttered words in any wise derogatory to the good of his master. Say therefore no evil of this man because of me, I beseech!"

A strange look came over him who wore the servitor's garb. Aman meanwhile motioned to his guards to retrograde, while one significant glance from the other's eye sufficed. "Fall to," he cried.

Before the keeper filed in with the rest, as ordered peremptorily by the Grand Chamberlain, he turned to Hadasseh and said, "The King, Great Artaxerxes, wilt answer for both the words of thy mouth and mine, O just maiden. I will free *myself* from this charge, while I shall also bless thee in so doing."

She answered nothing, but fled into the house affrighted; and casting down herself upon the cushions, wept, longing for the sight of Mardocheus or her kinswoman Zillah, though they came not. Sweet sounds pervaded her solitude, for the women of the harem were singing to the tune of the cymbals and lutes. To-morrow she was to go before the great King of the one hundred and twenty-seven provinces, and for a reason she could not in her suffering fathom, she trembled painfully.

So *many* had been before this mighty monarch without touching his insatiable heart, that for her very womanhood she could not refrain from fear that Mardocheus her kinsman should be deceived as to her own mission and for her people in all. Oft, so oft, she had pondered how this might be. How could she, a poor Hebrew maiden, melt the stoic heart of a

despotic and voluptuous potentate? Mardocheus had said, "The strength of the Lord God guides thee." And thus awhile she felt comforted, nevertheless as a woman having womanly pain and sensitiveness, lest treachery fall upon her in that strange land of many dictates and deceptions.

She had never seen one glimpse of the great King, though other women had conversed with their companions of his splendour, and the marvellous beauty and majesty of his looks, as also his surroundings. This bore no cheer unto her heart. She only thought of Mardocheus, as full of nature's grandeur, and of dignity and demeanour, as any imperial monarch; and her young heart pined for the sight of him, seeing that he had not passed before the gates of the palace, as was his custom, that day, nor had any tidings of comfort come to her through their faithful ally Barnabazus. She feared now some further evil had chanced to her afflicted people because of his absence, or that war had done its work. Her eyes fell upon the walls of the chamber, whereon were set symbolical signs of the great Bel, representations of the dependence of all creatures on his bounty. The hieroglyphics were more or less of a rude and complicated design, which to the Fire-worshippers of this land spoke an allegorical language, but to the Hebrew gave no ray of light or curiosity to penetrate the mystery beneath.

The heavens had assumed the gorgeous tints of purple-red, interspersed by strips of bright gold, resembling a brilliant canopy, before the gates of the unseen world beyond.

While in deep reflection alone, the Jewish maiden arose to her feet, let loose from them the sandals, and going to the open windows, looked high up into the space, that seemed in her devotion to cover the great Jehovah from His creatures of earth, and thus gazing thereon, like unto Mardocheus her kinsman, she felt comforted, and peace entered her soul as her lips moved in prayer.

Though around her were women of every clime and creed, godless all, yet despite their training and religious fanaticism anxious to cast off their several gods if so be they find favour in the sight of the mighty King of all the Persians.

Not so Hadasseh. Hither hath she come, brought by the voice of the Omnipotent to work a ransom; hither hath the "High One of Israel" led her feet beneath the shelter of His omnipotent arm, and she will never quit her faith, or cast aside the work at hand for her people's good. "O oppressed Israel who shall save ye if God forsaketh, and strange, unlawful gods become your portion?" Thus she pondered, and prayed from her soul in tears and sighs of pain.

Then came a shout, and fresh music from beneath, notes from flute and nebal. She knew it was the twelve who were returning from the presence of the King. They came again to the palace. Perchance, she thought, *one is* now chosen. But soon a slave entered her chamber, a Nubian woman, one of the forty apportioned to wait upon the virgins during the space of a hundred and seventy days, and she came forward to Hadasseh with a basin of porphyry con-

taining oil of the Tonquin-bean, a pot of henna, and khol for tinting the eyes, all of which she placed upon the floor silently.

"The great King hath *not yet* chosen a Queen then?" asked Hadasseh, knowing that the woman had come to perform the customary functions of purifying and anointing the certain others remaining for the morrow, and she among them.

"Even so," the woman replied, as she knelt upon her bare knees, and waited a moment or two, "he hath not, girl; but the chief of the palace, my lord Gabatha, hath ordained that thou shalt take stand amongst the twelve in the royal chamber to-morrow at noon, and thus shalt thou spend this night in making ready, as befitteth so great a thing, and I am sent hither to prepare thee for the bath, O maid, thou highly favoured one. Here, quit thee and delight in the love of the gods for such a favour."

Hadasseh arose, looked calmly, and asked, "Woman, tell me what art thou? and what god dost thou worship here among so many?"

"Ah, the gods and saviours of the Egyptians!" she answered, "whom the great in the earth *know* to be true. My name is Täis. Have I not travelled through the deserts, and dwelt in the land from a babe, where Serapis and Sethos arise in their shades of might and majesty, and, like many of my people, I bear upon my body the signs of such? See! look—they are here!" She drew aside the skin covering her breasts, and disclosed thereon deeply burnt letters, Egyptian hieroglyphics, of deep yellow, placed wrong end upward, denoting her allegiance to the gods of the land wherein

she had sojourned and dwelt. "These are they," she said joyously, "which speak of the Saviours *I serve*. Of others like unto the false hosts gathered here, though I be a slave and serve man, I know nought of them. If I burn, I burn. Ay, if the Ammonites, or Molochs, or the children of Baal consume me for wrath's sake, then so be it! I kiss their feet, and am no more, for *my god's* sake."

The young Jewess looked incredulously, pitiably, but she allowed the woman to unrobe her for the bath. She said murmuringly, "*O sorrowful creed!*"

"Some of the virgins have this day departed for their own countries," the slave continued meekly to Hadasseh. "And now, O maid, whom shall the mighty King choose from the remaining community, seeing the beauty of the women have got so low, and most of them have stood before the King's presence, and but few now remain?"

Hadasseh replied quietly, almost in a whisper, "Thou, Tâis, listen! The God of all other gods, He who could make this earth to tremble at the noise of His voice, will *Himself* provide a wife unto the King. Fear nought, the time has not come nigh yet, but it cometh apace!"

"But how canst any, much, such as thee, a Babylonian of no descent, know? Yet" (perplexedly) "when I look upon thy fairness, O girl, it seemeth unto me that thou art not what *thou seemest*. Who, then, is it that speaketh unto me, as I have just heard, and what God is it, who that putteth the words into thy mouth?"

"*He* who inhabiteth the world beyond, Tâis,

who speaketh wrath in the thunders which compasseth the earth at times, and whose love breathes in the rays of the sun, as also in the gentle breeze of the garden without. 'Tis *He* alone!"

The slave looked bewilderingly, almost aghast. Her eyes fell upon the reclining form of the girl, whose luxuriant hair fell about her in a cloud of nature's grace; her small feet dabbled in the perfumed water; and every now and again she lifted her dark, luminous eyes to those of the woman who attended her with a majesty of her own.

"Ah! it is of the *God of the Hebrew* thou speakest!" said Täis, inaudibly, glancing around fearfully the while—*that God?*"

"Ay!" the girl replied. "Ay! Darest not any do so in the midst of the Temple of the Great Bel?"

"O Serapis! defend me, no! Who shall know what evil they will work, if so be it come to the ears of the Fire-worshippers or any of the priests?"

"None!" calmly echoed Hadasseh, "none! Fear nothing for me, O Täis. Only continue unto me the same duties as unto the rest, and be no more perplexed. No harm can be administered unto me lest the Lord of Israel willeth. So now do unto me the eunuch's commands, and then leave me to pray ere the morrow dawns."

She was a slave, but of no mean order, this dark Täis, strong and stalwart; she had been sold from her family and tribe in the plains, and now served under the eunuchs of the Royal Palace. Sometimes she was apportioned service in the palace of the concubines, some little space distant from that

which had been lately vacated by Vashti the Queen, and sometimes to do duty elsewhere.

The woman's face at the close of Hadasseh's words still wore a look of keen surprise. None of the chosen "Three Hundred" had spoken thus unto her like this Hebrew woman; none had probably dared to openly acknowledge whatsoever creed they entertained but this fair-skinned, soft-eyed creature, whose voice breathed in the sweetest tones she had ever listened to, and seemed totally unlike the rest, firm and commanding, yet sweet and gentle in the extreme.

"I verily believe *thou art* of the Hebrews," Tâis replied, in a hushed voice; "none would dare so much. And yet—— Why should such as thee, girl? Hast thou no fear in thy weakness?"

"Hush," answered Hadasseh, with a quiet dignity, "when thou shalt, O misguided Tâis, in the time to come, bear record of this very night with me, remember then my words. How I repeat, '*The Lord God liveth!*' How by the light of the stars shining over the city yonder, and by the silent voice within my own heart here, I stand pledged to my faith, firm in the armour of that strength which is the portion of my race, unto all time. Be still! Say no more unto me, but let silence keep thy mind in *quietude* concerning me; and, moreover, when the times shall chance to be sore with thee, and many are against *thee* perchance, in that day remember my words, and in remembering them turn thou thy steps unto me; for the Lord wilt prove unto thee at that season *His own might*, and in that might shall I be able to aid thee and assure thy faith."

Softly her voice sank into a whisper, while the woman murmured some strange words incomprehensible, and as she did so, drew from her leathern pouch a sharp bodkin, with which, quick as the thought itself, she pierced her left breast with its sharp point, and winced in agony. As the blood came forth, she dipped her forefinger therein, and with a few pain-laden words she traced upon her forehead the sign of her God in token of her sincerity of prayer. A shadow of more pitiful sorrow pervaded her companion's face the while, but it was all accomplished momentarily, and neither said further.

And thus Hadasseh the Jewess, known only outside as a Babylonian, was made ready to stand in the presence of the King, as was commanded by the chief eunuchs and the seven of the royal Magi, before the King's high court of jurisdiction on the morrow. Alone with the infidel, alone in communion with the Creator of the worlds and of mankind, stood she, faithful unto the end, be it what it may.



CHAPTER VII.

BEFORE ARTAXERXES.

"A little fountain became a river, and there was light."—*See* •
ESTH. x. 6, APOCRYPHA (*after the Greek*).

THE slaves of the King's palace were hurrying to and fro, some bearing tributes of good things from the market place unto great Aman's courts, or to the kitchen of the King. A thousand discordant sounds issued into the air from the numerous corridors, from the windows of which came forth the noise of those set to prepare the daily routine of eating and the management of the Sovereign's table.

Here scullions blew the fires with the energies of the *Lares*. It was as though they worked in the presence of a god; for upon the raised platform, sternly overlooking, bearing a weighty spoon of office, stood the chief cook. This man's word passed forth to the hundreds of his least skilful disciples as though breathing the order of life or death. Breathless silence followed his frown, and obedience and trembling at the sound of his word, lest he might condemn any for inferiority to be sacrificed at a certain month unto Bel.

A little way unto the west of the King's kitchen stood the houses of the chief eunuchs, adjoining the

Queen's palace and gardens. It was communicated to by means of a terrace walk about two hundred feet in length. Over these beautiful arches, uplifted upon pedestals of marble, were set walks, and from the summit of these came the perfume of the delicious Tonqua tree, mimosa, and the bay. Here in twos paraded the slaves on guard, each attired in the armour of the King's household, while at the entrance was stationed another more richly habited, this being the chief keeper of the door primarily.

It was here that Mardocheus the Jew, under disguise, as was compulsory, sought tidings of the young Hadasseh his niece. Barnabazus, their only faithful friend and servant, contrived the means of speaking with his master at a certain hour in each day, and they met here.

Barnabazus was raised second servant unto Gabatha the chief eunuch, and therefore came in closer contact than those without to the ways of the household, as also to Court matters in general. Faithful as was this man to those he served, he was yet more ardent for the weal of his good and infinitely beloved fellow sufferer. Being a Jew like unto himself, he felt as keenly the woes of the hapless nation, though for it, he wore the garb of slavery.

From the gates of Susa that morning many of the women had again taken their departure, back into their own countries they were sent, having stood before the awful Sovereign without moving once his rigorous heart.

The Grand Magi now began to question anxiously among themselves in the Council Court, as to whether

the decree they had in the past issued concerning this thing had been the outcome of wisdom. Only seventy virgins remained behind in the city now, and yet the King's mind seemed in nowise likely to be led from the stoical determination not to look upon the face of women, and find an equal to the lost Median he had ardently loved, and in his folly shut off from him for ever.

It was early this day when Mardocheus passed along the terrace of the eunuchs and sought for Barnabazus. The guard, after inquiring his business, as was their custom, and receiving the reply, "A scribe for my lord's servant Barnabazus," lowered their javelins, and he waited in the corridor silently.

A Persian tunic had taken the place of the Jewish habit of old, and his head and face were also almost wholly hidden by a tiara of cloth, such as was customary to the city merchants and the generally well-to-do populace of the Persians. To speed the time on, he had recourse to his tablets, and in quietude he traced his certain hieroglyphics thereon. Voices came through the court, some of the tones causing him to rise and look troubled. But as they came nearer he drew behind a pillar, and was hidden from view, while the sounds came to his ears. Two men stood in the vestibule, and Mardocheus knew them, by their rich robes and their imperiousness, to be the keepers of the royal palace—Gabatha one, and Tharra the other, the latter who had had speech with him in Babylon concerning Hadasseh, and both held posts of high rank.

The elder and most forbidding in aspect spoke thus: "And the reward, O Gabatha? Dost think it well to risk our heads for this cause? What did Aman's

son, the valiant and strong Abinōe, say of the mission against Xenophon?"

"All that is fair," returned Gabatha, significantly. "Thinkest that I should venture at such a hazard. I tell ye, have no fear. Aman, *alone*, mark; 'tis Aman our adviser who rules; Aman's name alone that is feared far and wide, and hearken what I say also. Should the King, this young man who inherits the soft-heartedness of Xerxes, should he *be no more*, there is none (now Cyrus is dead) to rule in his stead, O Tharra. None but Aman the mighty counsellor now," significantly, "shall sit upon the throne of Darius for a certainty. Dost understand and read me?"

"Ay; but I repeat, how concerning *us*? The reward; it should be great to compensate."

2. "Abundant! We shall be co-relative rulers under *him*! Maychance each will receive a separate province to rule. To be invested with the supreme power of a toparch delights mine heart, sends joy into my very soul; for I yearn to govern and to be bowed down unto, also command the wills of thousands and thousands. Ample scope is afforded us to do the thing, Tharra. Why toil in subordination meanly over women, the harems of despots? 'Tis unfortunate we be unmanly, but the gods decreed. Come, reason the thing well; and my lord Aman, that mighty scion of the King, invites us to sup to-night at his own table, but take heed that the thing must be done, and done well—well!"

The second eunuch pondered momentarily, then glancing curiously around him, spoke softly: "The King may choose a wife to-day, O Gabatha! What

will chance to us then? Who also is this young woman whom the household crieth out concerning? Why, therefore, has her presentation been delayed almost until the last, for the people have a presentiment? The slaves have been nice with her, so it comes to me. And if truth be told, they anticipate that *she* will move the King's heart; and if this be so, the sooner *our work* is done 'twill be better."

"What of this woman?" asked Gabatha.

"It is the Babylonish maid I found in the city of Bel, O Gabatha. She hath no kin but an old man of letters, whom I left behind in the city. Her beauty has well nigh upset the routine of the house, seeing that the greatest care is taken of the maid, and she is set ready to go before the King to-day with great exactness. Moreover, I did hear from Aman the Grand Chamberlain that the King hath himself been abroad under some disguise, and perchance hath looked upon this young woman before."

The elder man looked and frowned. "Woe unto us if we offend any of the mighty," he returned; "but for our general advancement, would I do aught to bring us forth among the high in the land and the favoured."

"By the eyes of Bel!" cried Tharra, "it *shall be* done. O Gabatha, there is a certain potion, deadly and instantaneous, which years in the past I took from a party of Idumean pirates. This into thy hands I will give awhile; and when the time cometh I will secretly convey into the King's cup the drops; and at the season when he loveth more wine shall Siphar the Ammonite, cupbearer to the King, present a

draught of wine unto him, with the potion therein. Who, O wise Gabatha, shall suffer *save Siphar*, and what is such as *he* unto us? But, hark! the King's guard are making ready to escort the twelve unto the palace. 'Tis time to depart. Come! This business is ours alone, therefore I keep secrecy, and remain in our high office the same until the word shall pass from thy able and excellent commander and friend Aman in the time to come."

After dipping their palms into the holy oil, blessed by the priests of Bel, set in a little ewer of gold at the portico, they besmeared their foreheads with the same and, summoning a slave from the parade below, passed out of sight, and were speedily gone into Court.

A moment longer stood the Jew, as though electrified. He had heard *all*, and had not been discovered. What but the Divine Power had caused his presence there at such a moment? and now who but he could unravel this horrid plot, and thereby save the King's life from these traitors of his own palace. His keen eye fell thoughtfully upon his stone tablet. Written thereon was every word of what had passed between the treacherous eunuchs. The fact of villainy so clear to this just man momentarily seemed to chase from his mind the thought of Hadasseh, though his heart yearned for tidings of her. Again had another terrible secret been laid before him added to his own.

Every one within the metropolis seemed bent upon the ignoble persecution of his hapless people. Only yesterday had the sons of Aman gone forth into a little state near and massacred a hundred and twenty innocent offenders. Oh, for some hope, some dawn-

ing ray of God's great retribution, though tardy it seemed! But the Jew held still his unquenchable faith, still his eyes sought the illimitable space above; and his voice, choking with bitter tears, cried, "O God of Israel, how long! how long!" Presently a ray of soft light overspread his majestic countenance. "Shall a Benjamite lose courage?" he murmured. What the eunuchs said gives one hope at least. They had talked of his child, his bright, courageous, adroit Hadasseh. Yes, her beauty had been the theme indeed. To-day is to decide the fate of the Jewish nation. To-day will darkness for ever fall upon the face of the earth and the people of the Creator, or the burden will be uplifted and the ransom worked through a *very* miracle. As footsteps came hastening towards him, he thrust the records of his knowledge into his breast hastily. It was only a man who asked his business.

"Whom seekest thou?" he said. "Hast thou brought any tidings of Xenophon?"

"Nay, I desire speech with Barnabazus, servant to my lord Gabatha," he replied. "Tell me where to seek him, for I bring words of weight to him. *I am the scribe.*"

The words fell from the lips of Mardocheus with the quiet gravity of his nature. He betrayed no emotion or excitement, but stood calmly with his hand resting upon the breast pleats of his simmarre, like unto a ruler himself bearing command.

The man stared. "Art thou, therefore, the writer upon the stones?" he asked, somewhat suavely. "Methought thou camest from Athens, as 'tis said."

Mardocheus inclined his head, and returned : " Even so, *as I said*. Hast thou brought hither any message for me that thou tarriest so ? "

Whereupon the man delivered to him immediately a small knot of flaxen cord. " Yea, Barnabazus sent this unto thee," he said. " See, I have brought it straightway ; but I was wary."

Mardocheus took it silently, thrust it within his bosom, and allowed himself to be forthwith conducted to the gate, from whence he departed from sight. It was but the work of a moment when the Jew was alone to untwist the matter composing these cords, in the centre of which was disclosed some broad blades of grass, rolled upon which, with a gleam of satisfaction, Mardocheus recognised signs traced by the hand of Hadasseh herself. Swiftly he ran his eyes over the words, and read as follows :—

" Seeing that I, Hadasseh, am made ready to depart, I pray unto the God of our lives that I may be shown wherein to work the deliverance of our people. Grant me, therefore, O my kinsman, a blessing in secret. Also know that the word of our just God is in my heart, and that the love for my people filleth my soul. In these alone do I abide to accomplish this thing. Faithful greetings, and again farewell ! "

As Mardocheus now stood upon the plateau of earth without the walls, he could see the burnished spears of the soldiery, the armour of the Court guards, with the timbrel notes filling the air, and telling him of what was proceeding within. Now he heard amid the crowd of the twelve who had departed from the palace of the women, and had gone forth from the eunuch's hands into the Court of the great Persian

potentate, so that he knew his child was beneath the terrible ordeal at last. None in the city knew her birth. News had certainly been bruited abroad concerning this young woman, whose beauty and wit outvied the whole assembly of loveliness brought together in the metropolis, but nothing further escaped concerning her ; and now this day, with the rest, does she take stand before the presence of the mighty King, and humble herself before him.

Meanwhile, the vast courts leading to the chamber of the King were crowded with dignitaries, some commissioned to guard the entrances, having their own apportioned band of followers under them, and some within. Four of the sons of Aman headed their men, each resplendent in jewelled cuirasses of polished gold. The lines of slaves were drawn up alongside the walls, and these as each captain or governor approached bowed down prostrate upon their faces to earth while they passed. The sacred apple-bearers stood at the grand chief door of massive silver, studded with golden bolts, and prevented any gaining ingress, save those whom the King signified his command concerning, and further, desired to see, at which season the captain called forth the decree, which was accordingly taken from mouth to mouth, until it reached its destination, however distant.

This contingency of the royal bodyguard were commissioned to destroy any who presumed to seek the mighty King without his word or desire. Absolute power was given them. Death was the portion of any, no matter whom, even unto the sons of kings, who presumed to seek the Ruler of the

land's face without his prior knowledge. Thus were these warriors set before the palace doors, as a warning—destroyers of any who dared to encroach at seasons such as the present, when the utmost rigour and discipline were enacted by the State. Two also, these only provided with golden axes, which they kept uplifted, stood in popular position at the foot of the throne, as described in a previous chapter; so that if so be any intruder should chance to evade death at entrance, it became a certainty within, for the throne guards would immediately cut them down, as the law decreed. It was, moreover, in accordance with the King's desire (and his well-known affection for Vashti the late Queen), made known that in consideration of the leniency experienced by the young monarch unto *his wife*, a certain inner court was set apart for her absolute use. Only she, and certain whom she loved and admitted therein, were exempt from the general law; for it had chanced on several occasions that she had desired speech with her husband, and would therefore betake herself to the inner court, in significance of her desire; for in this way alone was it made known to the King himself, seeing that he could observe her from his throne within as he sat.

The walls of the reception chamber were of the utmost beauty, inlaid with polished stones of great value, which mirrored all that was doing around. Massive pillars supported the ceiling; these were upon pedestals of pure gold, elaborately chased. The former depicted the starry heavens, each star holding a precious stone, so that their lustre shone forth

brilliantly like unto the wonders they portrayed. Thus Artaxerxes sat, surrounded by his court, his feet resting upon a bordered silken cushion, with tassels of gold and silver. His manner was dignified, imperious, and his eye shone restlessly as he looked around upon the assemblage of his great men—satraps, governors, and such as stood high in order to the throne on wonted occasions. Aman also, richly attired in scarlet and yellow, with his tiara of dignity upon his head, was stationed at the King's right hand, clutching at intervals with curious irritability his robes in his claw-like fingers. Isis, his daughter, had to take stand before this monarch, and as yet her turn had not come. It behoved Aman to watch with all his usual keen *finesse* lest any come within scope of the King's choice of the few remaining. But one by one came forward, these virgins, all habited in white, bordered with gold, each one set before the youthful monarch, unveiled ; and while those servitors close to him withdrew awhile, he conversed as pleased him with them, and thus pleased himself.

Now the stentorous voice of Gabatha the high eunuch called forth again—

“Make way for the virgin Elpis, daughter of the Prince of Lysias. Hail to the King, grace! Hail to the King, discretion! in this great matter of the land!”

She came forward, a young girl, with a tawny skin, which shone like ebony ; for she had undergone much anointment with the customary oils and perfumes, after the order of the eunuchs, unto the certain slaves which were set to make ready the

woman for presentation. She was, however, comely, large jewels were suspended to her ears, which otherwise were small and shapely, and she wore a head-gear of Syrian gold-work, which fell upon her forehead and down her neck in massy tassels of finely-wrought metal of the same order. Artaxerxes in regal majesty (this being a State affair and a public matter) held out his sceptre for her to advance to the foot of the throne; but as his eyes fell upon her, a momentary impatience seemed to pervade his features. Then after the space of a few moments he motioned her away into the reserve court to the left, where stood the five prior candidates that had passed before him that day—*rejected*.

From the perforated canopy, raised upon the throne, dripped an exquisite perfume upon the purple garments he wore, and at certain intervals they brought fruits of a luscious kind for him to partake of. Yet a restless anxiety seemed rife in his mind. None pleased his insatiable fancy; and judging this day's progress, it would appear like unto the rest, and probably he was wearied of the ostentatious ceremony which had been made so important, and caused so much concern in the land, day by day, for so long a space.

Again the Court heralds clanged their cymbals, and announced the approach of another candidate. The chief eunuch came to the portal once more, prostrating himself, arose, and cried—

“O mighty King, live for ever. Hail to this day's grace, light of the universe! Hail, eye of Bel! eye of the world.” Then the slaves brought forth another. She stood erect, clad likewise in the royal dress of the

virgins, white and gold, and Gabatha gave notice of her in like manner as others—"Make way for the virgin 'Hadasseh' from Babylon the mighty. Behold, this maid hath *no* lineage. Hail to the King, grace! Hail to the King, discretion, in this great matter of the land!"

With slow but firm steps she came forward, followed by the slave Tāis, who stood ready to uncover her face. Around were none breathing a single murmur, in almost breathless silence were the countless auxiliaries that formed the heathen Persian court. Glittering gold and silver weapons, gleaming spears, breast-plates, and precious stones shed their refulgent light all over the place. Costly hangings of every nation lit up the space with a marvellous brilliancy; and amid them, at the foot of the seven gold steps of the throne of Darius, stood the Israelitish captive, simple, unadorned, only by the golden halo of the sun, which cast its bright and natural rays upon her as she looked upward upon the face of the King.

Aman motioned silently, but with peremptory dignity, to Tāis to unveil the head, while all eyes were bent towards the figure upon the winged throne. It was as though an unrecognised ethereal being had been set amid this congress of Fire-worshippers, a calm angel depicting Peace, shedding its influence upon the hearts of the congregation assembled. As the slave gently unfastened the white head-gear from the glossy hair, a murmur was breathed inaudibly by all. They were absorbed and fascinated.

A simple Grecian tunic fell from her shoulders, and a bordered scarf of white swathed her body. There

was no vestige of any ornaments, nor were aught needed. Her eyes shone with a steadfast purity, now and again catching a wondrous brilliancy, as thoughts passed through her mind of her mission hither, then they fell lowly to her feet. For a moment she was distressed, and apparently awed, by the hosts assembled. Crushed inwardly by the weight of magnificence and solemnity surrounding her, she stood at their very mercy. She also stood, she knew, before the Great King of the hundred and twenty-seven provinces at last—a despot! *he, the cruel oppressor of her race.* How could she bend the knee or supplicate unto the tyrant who had set his seal to destroy hundreds and thousands of her ill-fated people yearly.

All this flashed instantaneously unto her mind. She expected to look upon a man of great and imposing stature and of forbidding aspect, a cruel, bitter pitiless face that had haunted her dreams. She thought it was the King; and while she prayed for her people's deliverance, she shuddered at the sacrifice, and went forth, like a victim, stoical, determined, heart and soul given unto her people's good, to subdue this giant of strength.

Now in calm, soft tones amid the mass, there came to her upon the wings of memory the voice of Mardocheus her kinsman, the only friend and father she had ever known. "*God calleth thee to deliver us,*" it said. Oh, words, words, of glory and woe combined!

Her beautiful eyes went up to the awful figure upon the high, gold throne once more; while her hair fell in a dark mantle around her. One long glance sufficed; the whole spell broke forthwith; some instinct unknown and wonderful riveted her eyes upon the face

of him who sat before her vested in terrible power and dignity, *him* of whom countless thousands spoke in terror and with a trembling breath. All seemed as a dream nevertheless.

She walked now in her little garden space at the palace, and there passed before her a man who yesterday claimed her pity and sympathy. This man had said, "*Thou wilt look again upon my face.*" God of Israel, she saw him now ; she looked upon him, verily in a different aspect, *gorgeous and beautiful*. Ay, now his eyes grew, it seemed to her, as soft and emotional as when she had spoken to him that closing eve of yesterday, and he remembered *her* also. She saw the massive sceptre extended forth unto her, and the royal lips parted in a smile of gladness at the sight of her face again. *It was the great King!* Thus she fell forward upon her face ; thus she had again seen *him* whom she had known as the keeper of the garden only. Her hands were clasped in utter prostration and amazement, whilst the slave sought to lift her to have speech with the King. She stood again surrounded by her long hair, sheltered from the scrutinising eye.

Then were the servitors, the Grand Magi, and Aman the High Chamberlain filled with like amazement as they saw the King arise and lead her to his seat with his own hand. His countenance was full of majesty and tenderness towards this simple captive, of whom they knew so little, save that her beauty had become the theme of the city there. But Artaxerxes understood. His anxiety departed immediately. He spoke lowly to her but a little space ; and as she sat next him, he

again arose and delivered forth this mandate resolutely to his officers and the princes of his household, all assembled around him :—

“O ye of my palace, all whom I have appointed to serve me under my excellent and wise counsellor and friend Aman, take forth this mandate, and issue my decree as I command this day from my mouth.—Disperse the remaining virgins unto their own several countries, and also give unto each earrings of emeralds in token of this day, that it shall be borne in remembrance. For also say unto the nations around, and let it be made known in all the world, that Artaxerxes, King of the one hundred and twenty-seven provinces, hath chosen *a wife* this day and a *Queen*. Therefore, henceforth shall all men render unto this ‘Hadasseh, my chosen consort,’ due homage and obeisance, as unto the ruler of our heart and desires. Moreover, shall she no longer be known after the Hebrew ‘*Hadasseh*,’ which signifies the myrtle, but after the Persian Esther, a star. Thus do I decree, and make an equitable and just decree, that unto this virgin alone, from the number of those gathered before me, I now bequeath the crown of Vashti, and the just right to be Queen and partner to my throne hereafter. Forthwith, Aman our Grand Chamberlain shall see this thing is done, and further, make necessary details and arrangements for our wedding feast to take place on the seventh month, which whole month shall be set apart to all my nations for a general feast, in honour to my lawful wife, whom witness ye I have *this day* chosen from out of thy midst.”

Then he took Hadasseh’s hand, and raised her up to

stand beside him, while he set his diadem before her in token of his love and desire, though she trembled for the word of the Lord, which said this thing should pass.

They went from the Royal Court, each military portion, even Aman, who prostrated himself, and was meanwhile eaten up with rage and vexation for his daughter's sake, and that his cherished plans were thus frustrated. Nevertheless, he readily bethought of his work of evil, and was ready to bring every factor of such evil to work in unravelling the mystery concerning whom it was the King had at last chosen to wife.

Thus the great epoch of the state was brought to a close, and a new era dawned midst curious complications and great cupidity in the land.



CHAPTER VIII.

AT THE KING'S GATE.

TWELVE moons had waned since the day that Hadasseh had in state borne the vacated diadem of Vashti. A great high feast had been the result of the King's choice, and much joy and festivity was experienced because of the event throughout the land. The crafty Aman, to the outward eye mild, generous, and beneficent, was still despicably traitorous. He held the mastery over the reins of government, for Artaxerxes had little care or thought yet for state affairs. Deeply enamoured of his youthful consort, he denied her nothing, and, in fact, often sought her advice over matters touching the nation that the outer world knew nothing of. She held the late Queen's palace as her own peculiar property. She was happy in being able to minister somewhat to the wants of Mardocheus, but only through Barnabazus were they able to hear tidings one of the other. Persecutions still went on, groanings from the oppressed Israelites in captivity everywhere around. But no one knew Queen Esther's nationality, or that she suffered in silence over her people's woes.

The vigilant Aman had in part gleaned certain evidence that the Queen was in some measure related



to the man who had acted in the capacity of scribe recently to the Magi, and who still came every day to the "King's Gate," as the other vassals, awaiting calls from any who had employed him aforesaid. This man, it was known, bore the Jewish cast of features, yet for a certain peculiar fear none accused him of his race. He conversed generally with the known Jewish servant of Gabatha, and apart from this could nothing further be verified concerning him. Nevertheless, Aman had suspicions, and set spies to find such matters out more accurately. These spies kept a keen lookout, and brought everything they heard unto Aman's ears.

Every day the young Queen looked from her windows and saw her kinsman pass. Through Barnabazus also she furnished him with her doings, and how that she sorrowed because of her isolation from him and the thoughtful Zillah, and oftentimes pined for a few words concerning her people.

Artaxerxes meanwhile grew to look upon her as the light of his life, and by her wisdom of words and her soothing gentleness his whole will would be at times swayed.

Away from the grandeur, the cold, studied pomp of her high position, she would seek a little arbour in her own garden, and there pray and betake herself to writing upon the reeds and her little skins, as in the days of freedom and happy homeliness she had been wont to do in Babylon. And here Artaxerxes sought her one day. She was exceedingly sorrowful, and evidently meditating in her loneliness.

He stood quietly listening, for she had not heard his approach until he touched her head softly with his

fingers; whereupon starting swiftly to her feet, she stood up proudly, resolutely.

"How darest thou?" she said. "My lord" (piteously), "have I no solitude wherein to seek calm? I forgot unto whom I spoke; methought it one of the slaves until I saw thee. And I was startled!"

His eye still dwelt mildly upon her, and his lips quivered. "Esther!" he said, "have I yet no influence over thee? Though thou art my Queen, the light of my heart, yet a Queen is nought unto me if she be not the woman I love, and doth love me also in return. Why shun me? Have I ever sought thee harm, or been as other men—baneful to their womenkind?"

"Never, O King," she answered. "I have no request of thee, but that I pray a little solitude awhile to mine own thoughts."

"Away from me is ever thy desire. *And still*, O Esther, I love thee, and I seek thee everywhere. I yearn for thy soft voice in my ears, and thy presence to be near me, and then I find thee fled. Hast thou no little shadow of pity for thy King, ay, and thy slave yet?"

She seated herself upon a stone pedestal, and he flung himself down by her feet, burying his dark head in her lap. King from Indus to Ethiopia, and conqueror of great Xenophon, a touch of visible pity for this man, before whom a year ago she had stood a trembling captive, now kindled in her heart. She passed her slim fingers through his long, dark locks as they lay upon her knees a moment. "Rise, O King," she said, "*this* is not thy righted position, rise and speak to me, as unto a liege subject."

"Ay, Esther," he returned excitedly; "ay, I can do thy bidding; for though molten fiery lead poured from thy lips into my soul, yet could I condemn thee not,—only be good to me, be good to me! I am not what I seem! I heard thee pray to *thy* God erewhile," he continued. "Was there no word for me also? No cry unto *Bel* came from thy lips."

She looked at him eagerly. "Didst thou desire it?" she asked—"to serve my God?"

"Thy God must be mine, beloved," he replied. "I have served the god of my subjects, have forsaken the creed of my forefathers. O lead thou me back, turn with me unto the light of Peace, and let me share thy thoughts and thy ways, that I may have confidence."

She shook her head again sadly. "O King, the nation worships *Bel*! If the King turn, then must also his people, and this can never be while the factors of the evil one are prominent in the land, and while the *slayer* works *his will*."

"But thou wilt teach me how to discover these?" he said eagerly—"thou wilt."

"Then let not these evildoers, these oppressors rule," she said. "Let nothing pass beneath thy seal but that which *thou hast first* propounded to thine own wise and just knowledge alone. Ponder this, O King."

"And if this thing be so, my beloved, wilt thou love me, and cease to flee from my presence less, and let not my soul fret?"

He looked so little a monarch, and so much a mere man, stricken by an ardent and passionate love,

that she dared to think him nearer to her than ever before. But to work her oppressed people's ransom, she must first use discretion; and even though she grew to love this King, must she deny herself the privilege of that love until her cause be completed and her work done. Her people must be lifted up, covered with gladness, and with joy and honour, ere she must partake of any consummation of joy herself, and until then she will control her feelings, even in common sympathy, thus she reflected in the silence, as he watched her.

- a. In the days of the magnanimous and righteous Xerxes the evil oppressors of Israel had been levelled to the dust, their stateliness made low in the earth. And under the wise discretion of Esdras and Nehemiah the wise, both able expounders of the people's rights and the will of the Divine Power, the city of David, the mighty haven of the whole nation, was restored, and the ruined capital of Solomon became a strong habitation once more to them. Moreover, it gathered together beneath its shelter at that epoch some forty-two thousand four hundred and odd persons, people who aforetime had suffered the most unhallowed profanities and the bitterest curse of evil, their temples pillaged and devastated, priests ignobly destroyed with the sacred signs of their religion before them, and the miserable ruined community once more were driven like beasts before the whirlwind of misfortune and calamity into captivity. It was seventy years or so after this that Xerxes or Cyrus the Good issued a mandate throughout all Asia declaring his desire to

restore the Jews to their own, and rebuild the temple and city of Jerusalem.

Hither went the heads of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, the high priests and sacrificers, the Levites, and all that portrayed the once high spiritual and all-powerful theocracy of the Hebrews. Now darkest times had again passed over them. They had coverted once more in rough places, like slaves, for years ; yet no Judith, brave and impetuous, arose from among them like unto the past, vested with power from on high or heroism, to rescue them. The call from the lips of Cyrus fell upon them with great joy. They returned, protected, free, restored to the beautiful Jerusalem, their rightful and long-sought haven.

As the years passed, and their wisest legislators and counsellors passed away with them, their troubles arose again. The successors of Cyrus, though adhering to the just and equitable views of their wise progenitor, could not oppose the bitter animosity and restless opposition expressed by surroundings and otherwise neighbourly nations. Scattered as were the sons of Abraham the pastoral king, they were accounted as ever dangerous and unreliable people. And one by one, as their powerful upholders were laid with their forefathers, and generation passed unto generation, came again the terror of uncertainty, and the dark cloud again loomed over them.

The aged Xerxes died beneath the weight of long years, leaving his two sons. The youngest suffered an ignoble death, reflecting the greatest suspicion. In cold-blooded conspiracy to mount the throne of his fathers he was destroyed, and

Artaxerxes the elder took the coveted prize. Thus at this era did tribulation again fall upon the race of Israel.

The whole nation was now under the power of Aman, whom the King had ordained chief minister throughout the land. He who held the reins of the Persian government, an Amalekite, was a bitter enemy of Israel. A deadly feud existed between the two races, inasmuch as in the past the Amalekitish tribes had suffered slaughter at the hands of the Jews. Absolutely under the influence of this man, sanguinary persecutions were undertaken in revenge. Not only were accusations of conspiracy set afloat, but hatred of the King and utter resistance to all his laws also. Labouring under these impressions, goaded on to the act by Aman, who determined to bring about the entire extermination of the race, Artaxerxes commanded little less than the eradication of all from the land, and the whole of the accursed race.

"And who shall deliver us?" came up the despairing cry of the nation day by day. "Are we not cut down like weeds, driven into the stony places homeless and plundered? Upon the rocks and hills we die, forsaken in cruel ignominy, and cannot turn to fight as of old. Doth the King of the hundred and twenty-seven provinces rule the land? Nay, but Aman—Aman who sends forth the swift scythe of his hatred and reaps us up like unto grass—Aman who, garbed in the purple stole of state, mounts his chariot and ordains his six sons captains over his armies, to cut us down like the brute, and we are no more than dung upon the face of the earth, even so."

To Esther, as the Persians named her, came full revelations of all this bitter woe. She felt her people's grief, measured their sorrow in her own cup, and sorrowed in secret like unto them amid her splendour because of it, but thus waited, like Judith, her time. By her great personal charms she had led captive the mighty master of the land—she, a proscribed captive, knew it, but this was insufficient. She desired more than external attributes to master the will of one who could change the day of mourning with her beloved people into one of joy and ransom by the sound of his word. To bring this about she must use the most adroit discretion, intellectual influence, which alone could overpower his sovereign will, and set aside those bitter and cruel designs brought about by Aman ; and finally, in gaining the undivided confidence of the King and his absolute love, convert the intended slayer of her people into their protector and their lasting friend to the end.

Thus she pondered, even while she saw him now pleading in the summer alcove of her palace before her. He leaned upon the column of porphyry, around which twined the sweet-scented jessamine and tube-rose. A delicious miniature fountain of odorous perfume was gently playing in the centre of the apartment, filling the air with a delightful coolness and aroma. She stooped forward, and stepped to the reservoir, and dipping her fingers therein, laved her brow, as if to refresh her nerves. It was a lightsome and luxurious spot, having all the splendour of Eastern magnificence, away from mirth and din, sequestered, with only pleasures of a verdant and beautiful nature. The

masses of varied foliage, the floorage of mosaic and choice marble, had all the appearance of a paradise of art and culture. It was well known that Artaxerxes, a very Persian, delighted in everything the soil could produce that was rare as well as beautiful and useful. Around his own palace, as also that of his Queen, ran long parallel walks and avenues of shady palms, interspersed with varieties of fruit-trees and exquisite flowery shrubs. There was no eyesore of formality about the aspect, but the reverse, picturesqueness was observant, and all amazingly grand. There were large and magnificently carved marble basins, which held sparkling fountains, blue rippling streams gleaming all about between the shadows of the gardens. And there was ever the most refreshing peace dwelling amid so sylvan a scene that entranced the mind, and gave to the luxurious Persian the idea of the spiritual Elysium the mind endeavoured to conceive.

He looked at her intently, and said, musingly, after a moment of reflection, "I observe thou dost worship the God *unseen* whom my father believed in, and so set a mark of favour and distinction upon His people. Yet camest thou not hither from Babylon, the *high sanctuary of Bel*? How camest any to know of thee at all, and to bring thee here?"

"I was secretly spied," she returned, "by Tharra, who then sought my kinsman concerning me. Thus, O King, I came hither like unto the others to this Court."

"Ay, and thou wert as a spell unto me from the first. None looked into mine eyes as thou, none spoke the soft, gentle peace into my fretted soul like thee, and yet I can never command thy soul in return."

She answered lowly: "Never, O King, lest my God turn thee unto me, lest I see the Fire-worshippers of that great image no longer tyrants and rulers over the sanctified and oppressed. O my mighty King," she cried, with exceeding sorrow and pathos; "doth not *any measure of woe* come nigh to thee ever on account of the evil in the land?"

"Who doeth such?" he asked her peremptorily.

"That one unto whom the power has been given, O King, Aman the Grand Chamberlain. Didst thou not give unto him the rule?"

He started. A light of indignation flashed within the wells of his dark eyes for one moment. "Who darest to speak thus of mine own agent?—he whom I have raised to govern next unto me in my kingdom, in whom I repose *every* confidence, and none dareth hitherto to question mine actions. If, by the eyes of Bel, any save the woman I love had said this, they should hang upon the city gallows without. Have a care, O Esther, lest peradventure I may forget mine own heart, and steel my soul against the sight of even thee—for thou canst not rule—a woman."

The shadow of a figure as he spoke darkened the vine-twined alcove, and Barnabazus stood within, greatly confused in manner.

Albeit the words uttered by Artaxerxes were significant enough to awe the greatest scion in the land, to the courageous Esther they bore no weight. She stood still calm, and apparently unmoved, although at the appearance of the Jew Barnabazus, a certain surprise shadowed her countenance.

To see the King there had caused the man great alarm. He cast himself to earth immediately, and touched the ground with his forehead in fear and trembling.

"Why art thou come hither, slave?" Artaxerxes asked, stretching out one hand commandingly over him.

"O great and mighty One, I came unto the Queen; for I bring a message, my lord."

"From *whom*? and where is it?"

Esther drew forward. Instinctively she knew that Barnabazus had words to bear unto her from Mardocheus, and perchance this monarch might be deceived as to his mission, for already she saw a fierce light of jealousy pervade his visage as he was speaking.

Now in an irate voice, loud and threatening, Artaxerxes commanded—

"Where is thy master, slave? Where is the chief of the Queen's palace, Gabatha? How camest he to presume to send such as *thee* to attend us? By the altars of our god, I will inquire into this thing, and the scourge shall await thee for thy daring, though I forget thou art only a slave."

But the Queen, scarce knowing what words in which to pacify the monarch, yet with her own diplomacy, said softly: "O King, hearken while I open mine heart concerning this ill-timed man, who doeth indeed no harm unto the King's grace, or anything that pertaineth thereunto—this man, my lord, cometh hither in accordance with mine own desire alone. He is a faithful ally of my kinsman, who aforetime dwelt in Babylon with me. Give ear yet, O King, unto me, for

I speak the truth of my God, and the God also of mine unhappy and degraded race upon this earth. When, my just lord and King, the decree was issued forth into all the cities around, behold, to conduct unto thy footstool many fair women for choice of a suitable Queen, my house and kin dwelt in the once great city of this Bel, Babylon the stricken and bereaved, and fallen of the mighty. O King, neither had I father or mother to succour me. I was *an orphan*, and lived with one who was unto me as *all these* from my earliest years unto this hour that I stand before thee thy lawful spouse and chosen wife. My kinsman, who is my uncle, was to me as my father; and when I came hither, and was set under the keeping of the eunuchs of the women, hither journeyed my kinsman also, so that though in a strange land and among the stranger I might not feel discomforted and altogether alone in my woe. Every day, O King, hath Mardocheus my uncle, and of our race, sat at the great gate of my lord the King for tidings of my lord's servant and wife—*myself*, and by the mouth of this poor and faithful servant have I conveyed unto him my rightful state. Thus do I open my heart before thee, and further conjure thee to look upon the thing leniently, as befitteth so great a man as thyself, and so tender a subject as this which concerneth me, and mine own happiness; for I was but a babe, a young child, at my kinsman's house, when this man before you served me and mine, and he knoweth all my ways, which I swear are unto thee just and commendable in the sight of my God and man both, and my tongue erreth not."

Then still raising her voice forthwith, as also uplift-

ing her form erect and full of commanding grace, she called to the man as he stood trembling, "Barnabazus, speak forth whatsoever matter bringeth thee hither. If at this hour it is something imminent, still before our mighty lord of the nations say out the thing *justly*, that nothing be hid from him. What word, therefore, sendeth my kinsman Mardocheus unto me?"

The man looked still affrighted, and yet irresolute. He had never before been in the presence of the dreaded monarch. He had only heard of his majesty and splendour, and thought therefore of him as an awful and stern sovereign of life or death, without any other attribute. He raised his forehead again from the stones. Jew as he was, fear had made him fall prostrate at the feet of this King, who was the persecutor of his race. Words he could scarcely essay for the moment.

Then again the King, half amazed, yet softened by the influence of his Queen, said to him mildly, "Speak, as the Queen desireth. Dog, say what is required of thee."

"Great King, spare me. Thus will I speak; for Mardocheus the scribe, the late servitor in Babylon of the mighty and good King Xerxes, and now a writer of the tablets, hath come hither with a *great matter* at heart. O King, live long mayst thou in the land, and judge me if therefore I speak not the truth. This same Mardocheus, thy servant, O King, prayeth speech with the Queen, and sendeth greeting unto the Queen's grace, with these beseechings that she *fail not*, for terrible work is at hand, and he who sendeth me hither knoweth it all, and the purport thereof."

Artaxerxes now turned to Esther for explanation, while he spoke incredulously—

"This scribe I have surely seen for the space of some months in the outer courts of the palace standing *alone*. This, then, is the meaning of his appearance there." His brow clouded a moment as he continued, with some vehemence, "But how am I to be assured of all thou sayest? How is man to put faith upon the words of *a woman* or their slaves at all? Behold, the thing was never known with any reasonable men. And shall I, Artaxerxes, treading the soil of a hundred and twenty-seven provinces of the East, accept such from the lips of a woman? or shall I pass the matter on to the state, for my chief ruler, Aman the wise, that he may decide for me thereunto?"

The look of mingled pain and alarm suddenly overspreading the usually calm and placid countenance of Esther, caused him to stay his words further. It was a moment of indescribable perplexity and suspense. The almost wildly beseeching glance from Barnabazus, telling there was something terrible unrevealed yet to come, and which absolute fear compelled him to restrain mention of; but that he sought her presence, this Jew, as many a time previous, was apparent (for she had told him where she went oftentimes for solitude from the gilded pomp of her palace and state), but her retreat had been discovered now, and another had sought her in that retreat. He, none other than her husband, the stern ruler of her life, as well as the tyrant who was, to an unknown extent, slaughtering her people far and wide, the *great King*. The light

of fear that flew to her eyes almost as quickly departed. She looked at him as he stood, with one hand upon his breast, waiting perchance to see the effect of his suspicious words, and judge accordingly from her attitude and demeanour. Her answer, however, struck him with keen and perceptible amazement. He might have expected her to have fallen confessedly at his feet with a supplicatory prayer for very pardon, scarce being herself a culprit; but she stood, youthful, erect, her face pale with visible pain at his words, one small foot, revealed beneath the drapery of her tunic, planted upon the tessellated floor as firmly as an orator ready to propound his wise laws and decisions. And thus she answered him in measured accents:—

“My Lord! King of all the Persians unto Indus and Ethiopia, thou camest hither to see me, thy wife, as it hath pleased thee. Good! Thou camest hither also into my solitude, and thou hast discovered me alone. Awhile, so it was. Now this just man, Barnabazus, before thee, came also, and we stand together in thy presence, and, behold, thou asketh the import of this thing. A just reply, and the reason thereof, I have spoken from my lips unto thee, and I have lied not! The state, the ambassadors, ay, the chief and great ruler, whom thou hast raised highly favoured indeed next unto thee in the land, Aman, hath no power to rule the *heart* of thy servant and wife, *Esther*, whom thou hast set with much dignity also in the land—no power withal. Therefore, O King, be natural—for the just and natural man hath discernment and power to judge rightly alone from the *heart*; and further, this

matter is none of any account save unto the individuals concerned therein. Behold, now, as I am thy wife, and not a chattel of the state; as I am thy wife, and no longer a thing at the discretion of the seven Magi, or in the laws of sufferance of the harem, trust thou me. Let the words of my mouth be like unto those of *thine own, just and undeniable*. What I have opened unto thee, so let the God of Israel, whom the poor and persecuted worship in myriads, judge me in truth. Also, seeing that I fear not in mine exalted state, and thus do I answer before thee, without either fear or trembling, but in open truth, so let thine heart judge of me."

He looked momentarily upon the floor. Long his eyes had sought the depths of that great truth welling from her own. No woman had ever spoken thus to him before—*never!* They had rather quailed in subjection under him. Even Vashti herself had never appeared so full of courage, so endowed with wisdom, as this young woman, who stood now near him, not as a slave, not as a trembling subject, but as a Queen, weighing the scales of equity, and reasoning wisely with him, ay, communing, as of the excellent in the land, with his own heart, and melting his wrathful ire. Then he spoke softly, as if her words had pierced his soul: "Thou hast set a seal upon my mouth, Esther. It is just. Behold, *I have faith* in thy words. Who giveth to thee, so small a thing as thou, such wisdom and power over me?"

"None," she replied, "but the Great God who ruleth not alone my life, but that of thine own, my King. Trust thou my words, and thy heart will soften, even

as those who had the same manifestations when the world began."

While she yet spoke, he turned to Barnabazus and asked gravely, "Where is he from whom this message came—the man Mardocheus?"

"At the King's Gate, O great Master. Until I return thither he waiteth there."

"Go, then, bid him come in unto the Queen, and speak whatsoever he requireth. My word is given. Go!"

And Barnabazus departed swiftly, and was seen speeding through the gardens to the gates of the King's Palace, not very distant.

Now while he was so doing, Artaxerxes turned to Esther. "Beloved," he said, "never hath any woman compelled so much of me as this. But to prove that I gather the honey of truth from out the flowers of thy words, I leave thee in the presence of him whom thou callest kinsman. Of this man more shall I learn hereafter. Only smile upon me from thy lips, that I may no longer be esteemed in my own heart as a block of stone unto thee, that hath neither feeling or import in thy life."

Strangely his words, having a ring of sadness, sank into her soul. She knew him to be a man who was accustomed to condemn from the mere outward evidence of wrong. Now he had accepted her bare word. Who but the great and all-powerful God had worked this great change; but whether from gratitude, or a desire to show that his clemency and acceptance of her mere apology, as well as a token of how his undeniable trust had touched her heart, she

caught the hem of his mantle and pressed it to her lips, as he made to leave her.

He appeared bewildered, no longer a King, only a man in the spirit, swayed by the intensity of emotion, both spiritual and earthly, for which he could account no reason ; save that the presence of the woman who possessed such power of mind and body over him, he was as nothing.

They saw through the arches the tall figure of Mardocheus the Jew, erect, powerful, and grave, coming through the avenue of cypresses unto them. And suddenly conceiving an idea, she spoke as he turned to go, "Do not quit, O King. Nay! it would be wiser thou didst remain, lest any thought shouldst occur that I am deceiving thee."

But he stepped back resolutely. "Let this show unto thee," he replied, "that I desire thy love alone, and that I have respect unto thy words. I depart and leave thee, in token of my trust in thee. O Esther, but speak the purport of thy kinsman's visit unto me this night, for I will go unto thy palace that I may hear the same at sunset. Thus, then, shalt thou perceive in Artaxerxes a man of honour and respect unto the woman who rules him, because of his great love's sake. Farewell!"

"Our God guard thee," she said, "and work His will in thy heart also. Farewell, O King!"

Then Mardocheus came. Never had the Jewish Hadasseh, the captive of Babylon, and the Queen of Artaxerxes, seen her beloved kinsman so full of distress, so marked in visage as now. A thousand thoughts instantaneously flew into her mind at their meeting.

·What—what—troubles thee so sorely?” she reiterated. “Have they again—again killed our people? Has Aman, wicked and treacherous, swept off all he willeth? or is Zillah my mother no more? Some grave and terrible blow is fallen upon thee, and thou hast come hither to tell me this.”

But he gravely shook his head, and drew from his breast his tablets, as he spoke.

“Not so. Nought of those evils assail us, Esther, but another danger, which threatens even thee and *the King's throne*. Ay, God of my fathers, the King's life, for they will destroy him.”

“Of whom, my kinsman, of whom speakest thou?”

He put into her hand the tablet, from which she deciphered these words: “*At the King's table to-night* shall Siphar give the cup, wherein is set drink to destroy a ‘tyrant and a usurper’? Gabatha and Tharra the traitors and conspirators.”

Ah, she now saw him, her lord and husband, the King, blindly loving her, anxious to please her, and to prove his affection by this very act of quitting her in the presence of another man. She pictured him dying from the cruel poison of a base and wicked assassin; and she, more than aught else, saw those evil ones ruling in their own coveted place, and all over, all over with Israel for ever!

Thus speechless she stood. No! no! a thousand spirit voices echoed in her ears. Almighty God shall make her the instrument of saving the King's precious life, and thereby follow out His decree. He set her in her great position. The work is only in its early stage; but, oh, the dangers that surround her! After

a moment she spoke: "Tell me, O my beloved uncle, my father, how chanced this all, this terrible evildoing to come to thy ears?"

"I have watched, my child, and watched in silence. Twelve moons ago I was in secret waiting Barnabazus, our faithful one, at the Palace Gate. Here, then, came Gabatha and Tharra; and I, not daring to reveal myself, stood undiscovered behind a pillar. This plot was *conceived then*; for Aman's treachery hath so poisoned the eunuch's mind toward the King that they conspired, and I overheard it, and have the evidence written there. Every day I have, 'neath this disguise, been at the Gate since, and had speech with Barnabazus; therefore, he being in close service unto these men, by my desire, *kept watch*. O my child, it is in thy hands now to save thy King this night. Go forth with these tablets; give unto Artaxerxes the same, for this very night shall the deed be accomplished; but" (with reverence, as he stood and uplifted his eyes in prayer) "the God of Israel, and of our forefathers, shall, through this woman, work the deliverance of the land and our race, and thus frustrate the designs of the evil ones."

They yet conversed for some space of the conspiracy, after which she, bidding him adieu, sped to her own palace, and made ready to receive the King, as he had desired. She kept the tablets sacred from sight, and, with a firm determination, decided to watch the King's servants that night, and strive with increased fervour to frustrate the murderous design so close at hand, even within her own walls.



CHAPTER IX.

THE DEATH DRAUGHT.

THE Queen's Palace was equal in magnificence to that of the King's. It was built with surprising skill, beautiful in structure, and full of many curious specimens of workmanship, mostly the handicraft of Clearchus the Babylonian architect. Artaxerxes had sent his cupbearer, and also the chief cook, thereunto to prepare supper, for he desired to eat at Esther's palace that night attended by his special functionaries.

These scions of the King's household carried the meats which were for table, and every appendage for the meal was beneath the eye of these men so apportioned.

Thus Siphar, under whose responsibility was set the gold cup, pressed the luscious grape that ripened in the vineyards of the palace therein; the juice, after the sweetening and flavouring with spices, was delivered into the King's hand for his own drink.

The banqueting chamber was a mass of sculpture, and in the days of Xerxes had been the work of the Scythians of Scythopolis, who in the past had overrun much of Asia, and were famed for just and accurate workmen in the art of delineation and cunning carving. These walls depicted the growth of

the vine interspersed with ivy, the clinging tendrils of the former sending forth clusters of grapes, each grape bearing a precious stone of varied colours. The pillars of the chamber represented flowery palms, whose crowns uplifted the canopied ceiling, which appeared like a network of finely-wrought gold. Elegant basins were set at every corner, these corners being shaped in an octagon, having little cisterns of pure gold within. These were bright and splendid-looking, filled with perfumes, and reflected within the tops of the basins, wreathed with lilies and convolvulus of the most exquisite materials.

The royal table, also adorned with beautiful ornaments, was set upon a raised flight of porphyry steps at the east end of the chamber, and a little higher still the state canopy and chair. Marble jewelled benches, curiously wrought, were around this. These, being only three in number, were apportioned to the three nearest the King's body. Another cistern of gold stood near the King's chair, the movable property of the cupbearer, and the sacred cup belonging to the King's own table. This held the wine with which Siphar replenished the chalice, and none other than he was permitted approach to this cistern, upon penalty of hanging before the city gates.

The chief eunuch Gabatha, in company with Tharra, conversed in the apartment of the former, while the slaves were busied in the other departments preparing for the reception of the King and his coming that even. Tharra, more youthful than his colleague, and a little less ardent, had a shadow of foreboding alarm upon his countenance. A cloud of unusual

portent was overhanging the city ; for even had now set in, and the gates were closed, and with the barring of these entrances came a deadly contention in the streets. The fiery populace, embittered by the urgings of Aman and his equally evil sons, had prepared an unusual sport for the followers of "Bel" that night ; but it had chanced that a weaver of the hated community of Israel, goaded to madness by bitter blows and cruelty of his captors, had cast a catapult, and thereby killed his oppressor on the spot. This poor wretch, coverting in order to escape the infuriated mob, was at last dragged forth by his hair from his hiding-place ; whilst a drunken and dense crowd, followed by the imprecations and blasphemies of women and children, set upon him with a terrible vengeance. They drove him forward, and like a hunted beast he fled, maddened, through the streets of Susa. When he sank, exhausted and lacerated by blows, they raised him, pouring fiery vomica (a burning spirit) over him. Thus in agony he started on, on, to fall again and rise, until, after affording considerable sport for the barbarous Fire-worshippers, they at length hurried him to the spit of the god, where by the light of the moon they decreed to roast him as a sacrifice.

This horrid chase was at its height as the two eunuchs, each sumptuously attired in official robes, stood contemplating another matter in the chamber of the palace of Esther. They could hear the groans of the people, the flying of feet and the beating of their instruments of sacrifice. But they were apparently little concerned ; for, in answer to a messenger sent forth to inquire the reason of the

uproar, the slave returned to say that it was but another traitor and heretic discovered and tried by the people. These were no uncommon tidings. Under the governorship of Aman the Amalekite such doings were common now in the land. Probably no country on earth, under the dispensation of the heathen presented such scenes of cruelty and ignominious slaughtering than did Persia at this epoch. Nevertheless, these two men were too deeply intent upon their *own* business to feel any interest in the outside doings of the subjects of Artaxerxes at this moment. A silver chalice was set full of spiced juice, from which both drank as they conversed.

Tharra, traitor now to his own cause, the mere dupe of the other eunuch Gabatha, seemed controlled by a stolid melancholy. It had been foretold by the priests of "Bel" that a terrible event should at an early date take place. Aman's discipline and rigour over the priesthood had instituted this phantasy to represent the act of administering the death draught unto the King, under the guise of holy theocracy, the divine oracle of the god of the Fire-worshippers. For a year this had been secretly bruited. But Tharra had quailed in spirit. "What if the occasion be discovered, and Siphar find out the corrupt and wicked design beforetime, and they are the sufferers?" Thus Tharra questioned his colleague anxiously, while beads of hot perspiration stood upon his brow.

"Thou impudent body of cowardice," returned Gabatha, "to shirk at the thought of righteously punishing the tyrant, and, moreover, refusing subsistence, the high reward and the just recompense. Be

appeased—do the work, and leave the burthen to me. Who is greater in the land than Aman? Who rules so the irregular, disordered mind of the people save he? None, I say. Therefore conceal the trembling of thy useless body, and be satisfied that the King *shall* be carried out *this* night, and by to-morrow's dawn shall he who slew his brothers to mount the throne of Xerxes *be no more*. He who leadeth the wise in the land shall be the head. He who by the word of his mouth promises us the great and excellent reward shall rule. See ye to thy part, for there is the work, and it must be accomplished."

"What reward is to be thine, O Gabatha?" questioned Tharra.

"The former possession of my fathers," answered Gabatha, "the governorship of Tripoli, and four thousand darics of gold. But unto thee, my wise Tharra, also is given choice of three dominions, with a reward nigh equal to mine own, or the privilege of accepting a tetrarchship of a province near, as thou choosest."

Tharra's visage brightened momentarily. "Thou hast Aman the Grand Chamberlain's word and seal?" he asked; "and it is assuredly to be this night?"

"Yea, assuredly, and *his word* will not fail; but the thing must be done first. Art thou satisfied to do so or no?"

The elder man assented gloomily, while without at this moment sounded the shrill clarion and cymbals of the Court, which recorded the arrival of the King and his servants.

Then Gabatha, going to the centre of the apartment, sought for a small circle in the mosaic floor, and

having found it, pressed his thumb firmly upon the button of the same (a secret only known to himself). Immediately the stone, with a sharp click, flew up, and revealed a little aperture, neatly carved, and of a considerable depth, from which he abstracted a small ivory phial sealed. Having silently replaced the block and button, he arose from his knees and returned to the side of his companion, who stood in gloomy stoicism watching him silently.

"*This*," spoke Gabatha, with emphasis, "is a compound of better subtleties than thine, made by the chief deviser of mysteries of the temple of Hammon, Ithaca by name, a friend. By this means comes the confuting the evil designs of kings and the greatest scions upon earth. Behold this—which I have kept in secret many years until this hour undiscovered or revealed unto any in the land. Here it is! For here, O Tharra, is a draught of some small drops sufficient to slay thirteen such men as those having the authority of *kings*. But take heed, and guard it in thy bosom, for the use of the same is made known fully unto thee. Now, see to it; and when the slave of Siphar the cupbearer bringeth the golden cistern of raw juice into the Queen's Court, shalt thou assist him and lift up the same and carry to the foot of the table. Meanwhile" (here Gabatha's voice sank into a hoarse whisper), "meanwhile, O Tharra, whilst I watch, secrete this poison in thy palm, so that when thou shalt uplift the cistern the contents may fall unobserved into the wine. Have no fear, do all courageously, and I will make it well for both of us, and by the horns of the great Bel I swear the same."

Almost mechanically did the second eunuch take the fatal drops, hiding the bottle safely within the meshes of his ample tunic. Little else was said, but both men strode forth from the chamber silently; and whilst Tharra passed through the vast corridor into the banqueting-court of the Queen, Gabatha went unto the department of the Court musicians to order the preparation of the dancers and such as pleased the voluptuous fancy of the highest in the land during the feast.

As the hour waned came the depositions of ambassadors from different countries, hearing that the King was banqueting in the Palace of the Queen. Tharra thought the time was more propitious than when the monarch was beneath the influence of wily Aman. Esther's generosity already had become widely known throughout the metropolis of the Persians. She had not only sent to neighbouring provinces vestments for the poorer populace, but from her stores, corn and oil for the famished that sent up their cry of hunger unto her ears in Susa and those at war. But these deputations bearing these letters were refused entrance into the Court by Aman the Grand Chamberlain, as also by the chief Gabatha, who came and stood without for awhile.

Artaxerxes sat upon his gilded days, and beside his ivory chair of state was set another for the Queen, for the eating had not begun. The costly table, teeming with the most luxurious fare, was suspended from the roof by massive chains of gold, while the slaves and servers made their way to the throne seat at intervals to replenish the dishes as required.

To and fro, inspecting every dish that made its way from the kitchens, walked the dignitaries of the Court, with them Tharra, gorgeously arrayed. Musicians stood on each side of the hall, and a broad space was reserved for the feasts and entertainments customary at the close of every kingly feast.

The palace of Esther the new Queen shone in the ruddy sunset in brilliant splendour. Now and again the sweet-toned lutes, mingled with the sounds of the terpsichord, floated through the air, filling the space with a strange, soothing calm, and echoing with them the cooing of the doves that settled upon the gilded spire. Aman, with his attendant satellites, were excluded. None the less there were secret observers, inasmuch as so powerful an agent, ruling second only in the land, needed information even of the King's most secret affairs.

Artaxerxes sat divested of his garments of state, but wearing now only a plain, purple vestment, over which gleamed a jewelled pectoral plate; his head was even bared of the toga (the atmosphere being very heated), so that his dark locks fell like ebony rings around his neck. As he arose his eyes fell upon the Queen at his side. How regal and dignified she appeared; yet beneath her tunic was a heart trembling wildly, and bade her keep courage for the great trial at hand, lest she fail.

"Drink with me, O beloved!" he whispered; "yet, stay—where is my cupbearer? He tarrieth long to-night. Wherefore is this? He should attend us."

She lifted her eyes to his. "Doth my lord require

wine before the serving of bitters?" she asked, gazing ahead anxiously upon two forms appearing in the hall.

"Ay, my Queen, why not? that mine eyes may delight in that draught which maketh the heart glad, and for thee to share my cup, to add to the fulness of all." He then turned to the scribe attending him. "Summon Siphar my cupbearer on the instant," he commanded impetuously. The summons went forth. Whereupon Tharra made speed to carry the word to the court of the wine-pressers, and yet they delayed. Esther, very adroit and vigilant, observed this in silence. It was unusual this waiting at court. It was a thing almost unprecedented, and even liable to punishment. What had chanced to delay the man? What occasion had the second eunuch to quit his post in the court below, and seek the King's cupbearer with this confusion.

The Queen knew perfectly in her heart. Now in the distance the impatient eye of Artaxerxes fell upon the forms of Siphar and Tharra both returning, bearing the cistern with the freshly spiced wine in readiness. Now they neared the marble steps, and at last reached the footstool of the King, whose features had grown fierce with passion.

"Take Siphar the cupbearer hence away," he cried, filled with impetuous wrath. "Take the slave hence that delays duty and fails at his post until my excellent counsellor Aman on the morrow shall inquire into the matter. Thou, O eunuch, shall deliver the wine to us this night in place of Siphar." Now on the instant four of the royal bodyguard laid hands upon the unfortunate Siphar, whilst Tharra



served into the King's hand a brimming cup of the red liquid, with a suave obeisance.

A silence rested for one moment over the assembly, as the monarch's eyes gleamed at the sight of the draught; but in the midst of this Esther hastened forward, neither supplicating before him nor trembling for fear in any form whatever. Her bright, full eyes shone with a wonderful genius, an excitement kindled in her breast, as now she spoke, to the amazement of all: "Stand aside, O Gabatha and Tharra, and let the man Siphar be loosed!"

They stood back bewildered, every one petrified at her seeming audacity and command, being but a woman. She spoke again, clearly, not losing a moment, fixing her orbs upon the throne.

"O King," she said, "thou who rulest over the kingdom and thy servants here assembled, hearken, and set down that cup from thy hand which Tharra the eunuch hath delivered unto thee. Thus it hath been revealed unto me, Esther, handmaid of the great King, whom he has raised to the throne, that certain of the King's so-called *servants* have conspired to take away his life and destroy him who ruleth. Also, that these wicked ones have determined to secretly make rife with the King's existence, and thereby cause the land to mourn, and the wicked therein to flourish, and do abominable things in place of good. Wherefore, O great King, I, thy lawful Queen, through my God, hath discovered their evil-doing, and do hereby openly *charge* these two men now before thee, *these lofty-minded officials, 'eunuchs'* whom thou hast raised to be high functionaries in

2.

Court, and now before the throne of thy majesty, as traitors and wicked devisers to slay thy body.

“O King, yet further question me; and test also the contents of this cup set before thee now, in the presence of *all* here assembled.”

A fearful agony forthwith overspread the faces of the two culprits, while Artaxerxes dashed the contents back into the cistern, and springing from his chair, stood in a passion of frenzy before the assembly, all momentarily speechless. They quailed; it was both a solemn and awful silence that reigned. Esther the Queen alone, pleadingly beautiful, and full of earnest appeal, stood like a righteous censor, having truth written upon her countenance and a godly light set within her eyes.

“Bring hither, one of ye, from the stock without a ‘live creature,’” cried out the King, loudly, “one of the younglings;” and they quickly brought from the outer pen a kid.

And Nicanor, the physician of the Court, refilled the chalice from out the cistern, and poured its contents down the throat of the animal before their eyes. Patiently, yet speechless, waited all for the result, whilst with bated breath and anxious looks Artaxerxes reseated himself and gazed intent, buried in deep thought. Now to test the truth of Queen and slave alike; now to decide the fate of the cowering delinquents, shrinking in pitiable confusion and terror beneath their garb of boasted honour and dignity. It came—the poor brute, after a few minutes’ space, spun round in agonizing throes of giddy pain, moaned a plaintive cry at last, and then fell dead upon the floor before the whole assembly.

Artaxerxes arose. "O ye wicked and abominable slaves," he cried, "ye cowards, recipients of my favour, and conspirators of my life, who are ye among the throng that dared this thing, now fallen upon thine own deserving heads? By my god, and by my father, the mighty Xerxes' memory, do I swear vengeance. Where are ye? I say." He turned to Esther, and continued: "O Queen, wise and generous defender of thy lord and King, speak again thy will, denounce these wicked ones, and save *him* whom thou hast done hitherto so much for, and is now in such jeopardy."

She seemed scarce to hear his voice. With patient firmness and gentle movement she stepped up to the throne; and drawing from her bosom the ivory tablets, put them into the hand of the King with a gentle gesture. Here he read the names "*Gabatha and Tharra*," and signed by "One Mardocheus a Jew," the only witness of their perfidy.

"Who is Mardocheus?" he asked of her in a softer voice, "who has thus been my saviour? Is *he* also of the Jews?"

"Mardocheus, O King," said Esther, "is that kinsman of whom I spoke, and this is the sequel to what thou didst behold in my arbour at noon this day."

He raised his hand, and called forth loudly to the guard surrounding them, "Seize the two eunuchs, Gabatha and Tharra, and before the gates of the great palace stand the gibbets of the Ionian malefactors; now take forth these two wretches, and hang them thereon without further words. Let the multitude stone them and maltreat them until they die the ignoble and shameful death they merit. Go forth, I say, on

the instant ; go, rid me of the sight of them ; and call forth the scribe Bygtha, that he may set down in my diary for me the name of this just and good man who hath thus saved my life, so that in looking upon it I may reward him without fail in the day at hand."

And they hurried out the two men to the gallows amid the howls of the multitude, where they were hanged, and their limbs strewn to the four winds of heaven that night.

Thus ended the lives of two evil ones, and thus also a link was woven to bind the chain of freedom for Esther's beloved people by these very means, and confirmed by other marvellous coincidences which we shall hereafter record. The native generals of the metropolis were that night busy in quelling the ire of the populace, who were in a panic concerning the fate of the two Court functionaries, yet a wonderment spread over the city that *such marvels* had been accomplished even by a woman's hand.



THE MIGHTY RIVER.

BOOK II.

CHAPTER I.

REVEALED.

THE ignominious death of the two eunuchs of the women, their treachery, and the peculiar discovery of their evil made known before the King and the household by the Queen herself, attained great notoriety among all the Persians; and, moreover, that a private man of strange and silent demeanour should be advanced to so high a position in the royal palace, receiving apparently such a significant reward as advanced grandeur, caused no little astonishment in the metropolis of Susa.

To Aman the Amalekite, who had already attained to the position of second ruler in the land and personal friend of Artaxerxes, came unbounded chagrin, the more so as the plot wherein the two malefactors had come to grief emanated from his own craftiness and ambition alone.

He held, as was known throughout the land, dominion over the whole nations of the Medes and Persians, princes and generals, of the armies of all the provinces. Toparchs sent emissaries to Aman for

advice upon special State matters, captains and the heads of tribes sent him costly tributes whereby to curry favour and seek their general advancement from his own hands. He appointed guards of his body like unto the King himself, held feasts, and still entertained the highest in the land at his palace, where he had revels which for abundance and insatiableness became the theme of the land.

Isis his daughter, in company with Zeresh her mother, took part in these festivities, although the youthful Isis had gone over to the dictates of the devotees of the Egyptian goddess *Sais* and her attendant mythologies secretly long since.

It was, however, some time after the execution of the two eunuchs that Artaxerxes took counsel with the wily Aman in his council chamber as to State matters.

2, The Persian monarch, though possessing a desire to emancipate even at the eleventh hour all those of many tribes and castes beneath his dominion from reproof and punishment, was ever labouring under the influence of this conspicuously odious man. The internal or supreme government of Artaxerxes was rather an anarchy than a monarchy or general theocracy. Though strife, slaughtering, slave-binding, and other dire calamities were making rife the one hundred and twenty-seven provinces of the kingdom, the monarch never knew to what extent, leaving jurisdiction to his right hand in the shape of Aman, and his conquests unto the powerful Bagosa, his valiant general, whose prowess at that epoch was manifested throughout the whole land of Persia and Ethiopia, and who had fought with Xenophon.

It was Aman who secretly made known to the King, through the instrumentality of his subtle mind, stories of the most sanguine nature regarding the popularity of the latter throughout his provinces, as also he commanded the monopoly of glory in having achieved the love of all the populace for their King—this being absolutely false—whilst he with devilish wisdom quoted the world's consideration and homage for the sovereign. He, on the other hand, with equal adroitness, withheld the tidings of woe brought to the very city gates by the captive and slaughtered tribes of Israel, and of the people's abhorrence of himself, and of the conspiracies brought about by his dictates, whereby the intellect of a barbaric race became a votive hecatomb. Israel was fast becoming annihilated, and the golden calf "Bel," with the Zidonian Ashtoreth, were leading sway; but Artaxerxes knew but one side of the question, and he felt not the weight yet of his crown. Aman the Amalekite hated the Jews. Generations had passed since his race met with the just punishment they merited from the hands of Judah; but, nevertheless, he pursued every factor of vengeance which his position warranted. Under his dominion every phasis of corruption and treachery was brought to bear upon the unhappy position of Israel.

Aman had come into the presence of the King, for news had that day come from Greece that a hundred galleys of war had been taken on their homeward way to Babylon and were maltreated sorely.

"What hast thou done as a remedy?" asked Artaxerxes of his Chamberlain impetuously, pacing his *daïs* meanwhile.

"O King, I have secured an effectual means by sending forth my son Absinœ to command a fleet, journeying thither whereby to devastate the land. There is no occasion for fear. Bel guards over the provinces of my lord the King; and, behold, as it was shown in the King's miraculous escape from death a little space ago, such is the eye of our god."

"Ah, much as troubled me thereunto," was the reflective reply, "much crosses my mind, Aman. I trust and ever repose in such a wise and adroit counsellor as he whom I make second only unto me in the land. Nevertheless, I am troubled by many a confiction and doubt. At times when I would sleep the same surely forsaketh me, and methinks I see creeping vigilantly toward me in the still night a wily foe to pierce my head with a nail, or to slaughter me in blood upon my couch whilst the guard sleep around me. Yet, O Aman, see to it, for there resteth the King's life in thy hands. What thinkest thou is it that phantom's before me so oft of late? Is it the shades of Pylæ or of Cyrus?"

Aman's visage became softened into the calmest repose. He spread his hands across his breast, bending his head in utter humiliation before his master, as though he possessed that grave and studied perception, he scarce dared to utter forth in words in the presence of the impetuous son of Xerxes for fear of offence.

Artaxerxes, observing this, caught at the bait readily, ever suspicious as he was, ever impressed by the material pressure of fear incident with Oriental despots of the time.

"Thou hidest from my knowledge again some insidious and vile undertaking. Why is this?" he burst forth, with fiery vehemence, gazing fixedly upon his Chamberlain's face. "Why is this foolhardiness?" he repeated. "Am I, by the horns of Bel, a left-handed ruler, unto whom the vicissitudes of precarious stages of my Empire, or of my person, cannot be broached unto me? Thou fool, thou forgettest the shadow of my father's life reflects upon his son, myself; and that though I lack weight of those years, and the wisdom that accrued to him, none the less do I desire to rule with equity, and justly deliver such unto my servants. Speak out of all that that cast upon thy face would hide; for I am neither drunken, or in the mood for significant matters, be they in a false garb or whatsoever."

Aman observed the King was like to be wroth. He had ever the task at heart of paving his own way smoothly by some sweet flattery, or vain expression of the virtues of the man with whom he dealt. He had mapped out for himself, despite all, a road which terminated only in the throne itself; and he determined to pass along the same vigilantly, with that cute cunning he was ever possessed of, and finally draw the millions that peopled Artaxerxes' kingdom from Indus to Ethiopia into his own cause at last as their benefactor. "*But the King must first sleep with his fathers,*" just as the time of sleep for all men cometh.

Aman's reply came slowly, as though every word was weighed with the careful and deliberate consideration of an able statesman and an orator. "O King," he said, "the hearts of thy people trust in thy

words ; and, behold, each thing which in just equity thou hast also delivered unto thy servant, that have I conveyed into the hearts of the people at large, wherein this day, though I occupy myself with the arts of utility and peace, as also the decrees of conspiring kingdoms against thy high dignity and majesty, so do I likewise endeavour to promote the blessings of civilisation and the virtues of humanity, with all that are beneath the protection of thy gracious sceptre."

"That is known unto me already," impatiently interrupted Artaxerxes, summoning meanwhile the cup-bearer, "nor do I desire to know what assumption my servants take upon themselves. Now bring unto my ears straight the plain truths. If I must have an under ruler in the land, well will I have such, otherwise I will go forth myself and be convinced, as on the battlefield."

His companion's countenance grew dark. He suddenly prostrated himself low, touching his forehead upon the stones. "O King, great Artaxerxes," he uttered, from seeming fear and hidden grief, "let not Aman thy servant so fall under thy displeasure, nor let my lord go out into the danger which threatens thee. I beseech thee, go not out."

"Now, by my father's sacred bones, unravel this riddle," Artaxerxes broke in, as he motioned him to arise from his footstool. "As I have hitherto so rewarded thee, so will I hereafter raise thee *highest* in the land, and the people shall do reverence unto thee as unto none other in the land, when I find thy firm allegiance ; and as Bel ruleth, so I swear this thing shall come to pass."

"Then," returned Aman, "my lord, doth not the whole of the people in the hundred and twenty-seven provinces of thy kingdom set their faces towards thee? I answer, Yea, so it is, save *for one* unruly and pretentious people. Howbeit, thy kingdom is thine own, and not these scurrilous infidels. Behold, I am even now sore troubled in spirit, ay, vexed at heart, because of recent tidings brought hither again and again concerning them. Since, O King, the just punishment of the eunuchs of the palace, these facts have been brought to me by Abinœ, my son and eldest-born, whom I have apportioned to watch secretly over these folk."

"Thou speakest of the Hebrews again," interrupted the King. "Why always this scattered people, whom I have desired peace with, with clemency?"

"Ay, my lord, peace with clemency is the evil. They seek thy destruction again; they harbour false spies to make station within the cities and provinces; they come even to the threshold of thy sacred palace, ay, to the table of my lord the King, and there work destruction though he knoweth it not. These people," continued Aman, "slaves and hirelings whom thy father so graciously, yet with unthoughtful wisdom, ransomed awhile, have ever been refractory and unscrupulous everywhere they pitched their tents or set their feet. Their mouths are filled with lies, for they make themselves rulers, and recognise none other in the land. Behold, last even came to me Gisaphernes of the priesthood from the temple requiring aid, for it was known that these subservient slaves had thrown down the statue of the god and maltreated the high priest nigh unto death; moreover, they come

nigh, O King, to thine own chamber, and lay wait, like unto Gabatha and Tharra, for their opportunity to secretly slay thee. Now, seeing that my lord the King *required of me* this, and the reason whereof, my face grew darkened, behold, I have spoken, and the matter is open now before thy grace."

The monarch turned from him with a fretted sigh. "When—when shall I rid me of these wretches, of whom I hear nought but treachery and evildoing? Concessions truly I have vouchsafed, day by day, unto them. Did I not commission a tetrarch to Smyrna to watch over their interests after the war with Greece, when I listened to the pleadings of the scribe Mardocheus? Ay, and yet am I scouted by hideous fancies about the race, despite the entreaties of him who hath revealed to me much in their favour hitherto. Why should this race stand aloof and apart from the world, and refuse submission to so capable a government as mine own, when I desire their friendliness and their own good. Tell me, thou man," he continued, with some haughtiness, "thou who canst never see aught but moats of wickedness in these Jews, what are they? from whence came they in thy estimation, for so great a lettermonger as Aman knoweth surely?"

There was evident sarcasm in the King's voice. Much as he depended upon the doings and words of the crafty Chamberlain, some speck of perplexity and evident displeasure shadowed his hitherto regardless temperament, because of the world-wide and open enmity of Aman the Amalekite towards this hunted and scattered race, and his desire to strike

down their existence, body and spirit, whenever he found chance, seeing his mouth ever bore complaint.

"My lord," was his reply, cringingly covering his mantle across his breast, "doth it not behove one, whom the great King hath vested with so high an authority, to speak with decision and truth, when the King and his natural people's good is at stake? O King, *am I not* the voice of the people, so apportioned to stand before thee and propound unto thee what is requisite? Am I not my lord's old servant, having the weight of such a responsible power that is weighty as ore upon my shoulders? Yet doth my lord look upon me heavily, and in wrath, inasmuch as I speak of the danger which is nigh, ay, O King" (in a whisper), "ready to pounce upon thee in the very throne."

At these words Artaxerxes sprang up excitedly, his eyes again ablaze with the fury conspicuous in his race. "By the horns of the great altar, there is then truth in thy words, and I sleep while the murderers surround me. Say—say out quickly—what has chanced to cause such from thee, this denunciation against these craven Israelites. Methought, ah, methought peace was gaining the kingdom at last, and anarchy and republicanism falling into a nameless grave, but now not so. My soul is fired that my well-doing is set at nought by these refractory people, who would claim the whole earth as their heritage if they could. What's to be done? What's to be done?"

"O King, *rest peacefully*, and take no alarm, I beseech," Aman replied, prostrating his face again to the earth. "Inasmuch as Aman, son of Agag the

Amalekite, hath worked in thy name, and caused the nations to tremble, so shall the Jews, the herdish race of the shepherd rulers who boast such aggrandisement, fall to earth and tremble likewise; so shall Aman deliver forth unto the delegate rulers of this so-called Israel thy words of extermination, and thus uproot every useless branch from the whole stock from off the face of the earth wherein great Bel and King Artaxerxes ruleth greater than any. But—stay, my lord the King—quiet, betokens the vigilant and trustworthy, and patience bringeth a better reward than speed, also vengeance is sweet to the revengeful, if the cause be good. Wherefore, shall *not Aman avenge* the wrongs of his King? Ay, verily, it shall be so. Yet, as I said, with slowness and patience, so that my lord shall be convinced before the time of destruction cometh that Aman doth not lie.”

“What plan? Speak out, O my trusty friend and best counsellor, speak as unto a brother, and I will heed,” returned Artaxerxes, assailed by remorse for his wrathful words.

“This, this, my lord, will I say, and no more, Watch well *him* whom thou hast set high in the Royal Palace; for there be some walking the earth now, spirits of the evil gods, and one that cometh very nigh unto thee.

“In whom? In whom, Aman?”

“If I breathe his name, blame me not with wrath, for favour has been his portion from thy hands; and though he awhile set up himself as a virtuous one, he is a *spy* and a murderer, now in quest of an opportunity.”

"Fool!" irritately gasped the King; "speak his name, that he may be roasted upon the spit of the malefactor, or torn limb from limb by the wild beasts in the arena. Who is this wretch? I will that his name be spoken."

"My lord the great King," answered Aman; "this, I beseech thee, goeth against mine own poor words of advice which, as a slave to thy Majesty, I proffered. Let him rest, O King, until I prove him to thine own sight. Let him abide in his position awhile, but let no reverence or respect be done unto him, neither *any* favour from the great King."

"'Tis well," the King responded, in a calmer tone. "'Tis well, O wise Aman. Who is the traitor? By what name is he known?"

"Mardocheus the Jew, O King—that same man."

Artaxerxes stood bewildered, with astonishment, scarce realizing, but dumb with surprise. At length he spoke, incredulously: "Mardocheus, the learned man, who saved me from the eunuchs' murderous fingers! He whom I have learned to look with favour upon! Nay, O Aman, the old wound has but burst out afresh in thy bosom, and this grave, quiet scribe is meeted out unknowingly as one of the infidels. He who dared so much to save my life could surely not stand by to take it himself! Say rather it is Pertageous the Chaldean, or Pisos the Lybian, who was one of the conspirators of my brother. Surely not this good, just man whom I bade take his rest in my Court for his virtue's sake alone!"

"Even so! Behold in Mardocheus the scribe, the lawgiver, the servitor unto the late King's

Highness, a Jew, yet a secret spy for his people, a captive whom thou hast raised from the very filth of the earth unto greatness ; for he cometh from a stock called the Benjamites, and should be deadly in the sight of Artaxerxes, the King of the Medes and Persians, for his very treachery sake."

"Go hence !" returned the King, "*leave me!* Let it be known the service thou renderest the King, and give out our Royal word that just homage be done unto thee by all throughout our kingdom, and behold the King's missive shall follow thy words concerning these things, for I will ponder the matter well, and deliver judgment for the same early."

Aman bent and kissed the footstool of the throne, and quitting the chamber stood secreted, and watched apart at a little distance. Artaxerxes meanwhile was troubled, and sat deep in thought. "Mardocheus was known now to be kinsman unto Esther the Queen. She had confessed it. But he was a Jew. What, therefore, was the Queen? A Jewess? How could he hang upon the gallows the man who some space ago saved him, and had received no reward save the position of that of a servitor in the palace?" Thus the King pondered, and a strange, perplexed sadness overspread his visage. He cast his purple over his shoulders, called to him Prince Memucan, and passed forth through the gardens to the palace of the Queen again. But Aman crept out from his hiding-place, and ordering his chariot and attendants, set forward to herald his new position to the people and receive their homage.

So, as the King had said, thus the Chamberlain,

highest in the land now revelled, therein should not countless hordes of humanity throughout the whole metropolis bow down in obeisance, and accept Aman as second unto the King alone? But Mardocheus silently looked on the multitude, and no word escaped his lips, though he heard and knew all. Unto the Creator of the living world alone was homage and adoration due, and before Aman, enemy of the "*chosen*," hater of the just, should he never bend the knee in homage.

And they came near the palace at even, and peremptorily requested Mardocheus to fall down in reverence *to him* whom the King had raised, and commanded the people to do reverence to, for his word's sake.

The city was in great disorder; thousands and thousands, knowing the power of the Amalekite, from fear alone, humiliated themselves to the very stones as he passed, gaudily arrayed, in his chariot. His six sons were called in the train; their fierce warlike looks and garb and their brazen tunics intensified the fear of the crowds gathered together in the city.

Gigantic soldiers, carrying brass bucklers and gleaming weapons, passed in huge battalions in the rear. Fierce Leitetanians, naked save their tiger skins, uplifted clubs of war, whilst they chanted a battle cry as they strode on with the procession. Negroes yet in captivity, Numidian warriors, Painted Lydians, swelled the formidable array. Likewise, herds of idolatrous Ethiopians, some from Egypt and Cappadocia, covered with vermilion stripes, and tattooed about the

body to resemble the skins of snakes, chanted unintelligible *patois*, harsh and dissonant.

As the procession of the High Chamberlain Aman passed the temple, the eunuch priests of Bel, pale, and clothed in white robes, with heads and faces completely shaven, joined the throng, beating upon the golden lyres strange and almost monotonous tones.

These exhorted the people to bow down to "*him*" whom the god had favoured so well. In their girdles they carried some strange concoction, a saliva of the god, with which they now and again made mystic signs upon their brows and the soles of their feet. Other lugubrious sounds came from the Lybian warriors, who beat a war tattoo upon their skin instruments; these likewise resorted successively to the barbaric rhymes of their creed, as they strode onward with the rest through the metropolis.

Fear, excitement, and the innate superstition of the Persians swayed the populace of Susa with mystic emotion. They even looked upon Aman as a god, a being commanding life and death. Agitation was paramount in the breasts of the multitude; women slaves fell down kissing the ground whereon the procession had passed. Involuntarily, men shouted enthusiastically, "Hail! to the lord of the land! eye of Bael, favoured of the god!" Exiles, malefactors, merchants, peasants, in one voice acclaimed aloud as the cavalcade proceeded through Susa.

Meanwhile, Aman lay in a grand purple and gold litter, ornamented with clusters of ostrich and peacock plumes. This was drawn by two camels, but the charger bearing the King's herald walked by the side.

This bore upon its arched head a golden crown, studded with precious stones, in token of the high rank of the Chamberlain. Other cavalry came on also, wearing armour of gold and silver scales covering them entire. When the halt was proclaimed at every mile, the music went forth loudly, broadswords were unsheathed, hatchets uplifted ; and thus was Aman, next in the land unto the King, eulogised before the people as the King's chosen friend and helper. Through the curtains of his litter this man looked forth, his visage impassive, hideous, and almost ghastly with fervid excitement. His body was partly hidden by the costly skins which covered him, but his shoulders were enveloped in a scarlet mantle studded with silver crescents. He also wore a heavy collar of gems, which fell down upon his bare breasts in glittering masses. His head was adorned with a turbaned crown, resembling two curled rams' horns of gold, which gave to his features a more repulsive appearance ; large emerald earrings, the weight of which, added to his physical deformities, fell upon the rolls of his fleshy neck like the breasts of a Libyan slave woman. The idea of partaking the homage due to a deity seemed to wholly absorb him. He lay with half-closed eyes, drinking in the cries of the populace, his oblique head now and again shifting restlessly upon the silken cushions, whilst colossal Ethiopians, with vehemence, having nine-thonged whips in hand, slashed back the crowd mercilessly.

Now was eventide drawing nigh as they neared the gates of the King's Court, and Mardocheus stood within, wrapt in deep thought, immovable, and stern. He had

committed to papyrus the events of the day ; and passing the apartments of the Queen, he had stood awhile to look upon her windows, and perchance catch a sight of her ; but she came not, as she was wont, that day, so Mardocheus passed out upon the fourth tier of marble (the King's palace having the shape of an amphitheatre or arena). Beyond, his eyes scanned the olive and cypress groves, the high dwellings of the rich, and the broad walls of the city in the distance intervened by the blue river. Huge towers stood in the perspective, the temples of the several gods—Bael, Ashtoreth, Pan, and Osiris—around, the acropolis gleamed beneath the bright sun, and the golden ball at its summit shone resplendently in the setting gleams.

Through the air now came borne the sound of the nebals played by the slaves of the Queen's Court, like the soft soughing of the trees of the surrounding gardens ; and presently through the paved court, leading forth into the quadrangle of the metropolis, and the principal portion of the city, swiftly running upon bare feet, came the scarlet-painted mercuries of the court, bearing their golden apples upon bright rods before them, shouting eagerly, "Make the way—clear, clear—for my lord, the great friend and counsellor of the mighty King, Aman! Aman!! the great, the mighty servant of Bel, whom ye must bow down to and do reverence. Smitten be those with internal turmoils who disobey. Haste and clear, clear ye, and bow down!" Then they scattered blue marble dust resembling the firmament overhead, and the Jew perceived through the light mists floating around a whirling mass approaching, through

which could be defined the heads of the camels, the flashing lances and bucklers, and he knew that Aman his enemy drew near, and there was no retreat for him. He wound his mantle closely to him, and stood immovable, still full of dignity.

Before the litter of the pampered and satiated Amalekite were bowing down in subjection officers of state, the captains of hosts, the Magi, ay, all occupying the city save this one man Mardocheus. Whereupon a great cry arose from the whole multitude, inasmuch as Aman had perceived the Jew where he stood, and stayed his progress to inquire why this captive evinced no obeisance to him who was second in the land. "Who is the slave?" he inquired, knowing withal, yet assuming that dignity he ever dominated with immeasurable scorn.

"My lord," answered the herald, "this man is a writer of the King's Court, and waits in the palace, yet doeth he no manner of reverence unto thee."

"Command him to cast his face to earth," shouted Aman, in a frenzy of passion, his thick lips swollen with rage and vexation. "Bring the slavish Israelite to his knees that he may lick the dust before his lord and benefactor, or shall he hang upon the gibbet, his due."

But Mardocheus raised his arm aloof; and after waving back the crowd, the Ethiopian whips, and also those who had gathered upon the steps of the palace, commenced in measured tones—

"O ye people of Susa, servants of the King, hearken and heed my words. The just God of our salvation alone mingles in my life, and I serve *the King*. These

are the two germs that alone command my obeisance ; these do I reverence unto ; other deities have I none. The King whom my God hath raised in the seat of his fathers do I serve with my body, yet I stand upon the sphere of the Creator's handiwork, and look yonder unto the dwelling-place of the Most High *in my spirit*. Wherefore, seeing this is my creed, leave me in peace ; for I will not bow down to earth for this man's sake, nor lower myself thus in the eyes of the God of Israel, to do homage to the unkingly in spirit."

A commingled buzz of anger and surprise arose in the air, a hoarse murmur.

"Shall we deliver him over to the scourger?" called forth the captain of the foot soldiers ; while Aman, very wroth, clutched his coverlid excitedly, and gazed with malignant hatred upon the Jew as he stood aloof. Some would fain have rushed upon Mardocheus, those particular votaries to the Amalekite ; but the calm exterior, the benign expression of his face, gave them a certain awe, inexpressible, for awhile.

A silence reigned. The noise of the companies did not reach him, he was wrapt in calm defiance, while memories buzzed in his brain—memories of the bitter anarchy wrought by the children of this evil one—yet his heart leapt strangely as in the vista of imagination he saw "Israel" re-established and peace from the toils of slavery ahead. He saw the influence of Aman upon the minds of the populace, notwithstanding they obeyed him, not because of the goodness of his nature, but that he possessed a magnetic power to work the works of infamy and call it justice, and had made aggrandisement his weapon.

Mardocheus still stood, sentinel-like—until a hoarse cry arose again from a thousand throats, uttered in Chaldaic, Egyptian, and Arabic, commingled, like the growl of beasts. Men gripped their weapons, while women ran their long finger nails into their palms, hankering to get at him, so that they might annihilate him for his obstinacy and contempt.

He, a scion of the degraded infidel, a Jew, who ignored the gods of the land, and incensed the mind of his tribe to treason and bloodshed, and were full of boasts. It was so that Aman had impressed them, that at the sight of this man some yearned to apporportion the slingers a stand, so that they might slay him there. In short—Aman desired the death of Mardocheus greatly, yet knew to kill him unrighteously without trial would not be commendable in him at the present. The Ethiopians now came forward jeeringly with stones, and some flung them at him. Yet he moved not. They surged round him vehemently like a multitude, clarions sounded loudly, while Aman looked on defiantly, desirous to slay him, yet dared not.

“Slay the wretch,” groaned some, “the hook-nosed slave, who defies the highest in the land, and calls upon his unknown God to aid him. Rip his flesh from his bones, he is worse than a Nochian. Let him go to his ark.”

Despite the sons of Aman, who endeavoured to quell the wrath of the lower populace, they grew like brutes, incensed by the sheer desire for blood; and crowding round him, slashed upon him with their whips fiercely. They smote him upon the face, that the

blood gushed from a deep cut laid bare upon his cheek. But just now a murmur caused him to raise his eyes aloof; for from the palace roofs came down a myriad of doves, which settled upon his person, cooing plaintively, so that he was completely shielded by their little white bodies at last, and they covered the space where he stood. They fluttered their white wings excitedly, their pink feet gleaming through the feathers. These sacred birds, claimed by the temple of Bel itself, were looked upon with pious awe and reverence. It was observed as an omen should aught attract these little creatures from their habitations; for the devotees of the god Bel considered the event as calamitous, and in some wise a sign of the god's anger, should aught so offend them.

Now, seeing the sacred birds surrounded the Jew as he stood, the crowd drew backward on the instant, muttering unintelligible cries of vexation and alarm, since they dared advance no further.

"It is the god, the eye of Bel hath been directed thither, O great Aman. Let us pass from the presence of this strange man until a fitting season, when he shall again appear derisive; for, behold, the people know him, how that he beneath the Persian robe hides the signs of the accursed race. Issue decrees to slaughter both him and his tribes; issue decrees that it shall be done; but let us now pass on, lest we be smitten the while."

The priests from a porphyry basin sprinkled the people with an oily unguent, and sent up into the heavy air vapours of incense from their tripods, crying mournfully. The smoke curled in massive rings, and became lost in the sky, whilst there broke through

the trails moans intensely melancholy, mingled with dismal chants indescribable.

Men simultaneously recoiled from where he, with bared head and calm composure, stood revealing the signs upon his brow of the priesthood of the Jews, and they knew him. Some fled, howling, away from the square of the palace unto the streets, and escaped from the sight of the confusion, affrighted.

But awhile after, when the air grew clearer, the mass remaining looked up as though to find him still standing; but they saw only the sacred doves, like a volume of pure white, settled upon the mantle he had left. All was quiet, all subsided into perfect peace. The trumpets, the hoarse cries, dismal chants, and the malignant gibes of the multitude had ceased; and when Aman, with his splendid hosts, uplifted their eyes to the marble tier where this man had ere-while stood, they saw him not, for he had passed out of their very midst, unharmed and in safety, and had departed unto his own place.

Thus bearing his pain of body with resigned humiliation, the Jew solitarily called forth again from his dwelling unto the Great Judge and Creator of the world and mankind—

“That I did not bow down to proud Aman. For I could have been content with goodwill for the salvation of Israel to kiss the soles of his feet. But I did this that I might not prefer the glory of man above the glory of God” (Esth. xiii. 12-14).



CHAPTER II.

THE HOUSE OF AMAN.

SO another moon passed after this matter, and still the land was in turmoil. The palace of Aman, at a small distance from that of the King's, was built without the walls of that portion known as the Outer King's Court. It stood upon a space nearly resembling a quadrangle, about six hundred yards in length, and four hundred in breadth. Its height was irregular, the loftiest point being a massive dome, which enclosed the remains of "*Sha Agagi*," the father of the Chamberlain; and to this enclosure only the priests of Bel made ascent at the seventh full moon in each year, to invoke the god's grace for the descendants of the same, and to pray to the stars before the bones of the dead laid bare.

The architecture of the rooms beneath was complicated, crude, and singular. One represented the inside of a fish, and was painted outwardly also in the glowing colours of its scales. Another was like a crystal cave, dedicated to "*Eschmoûn*," wherein was planted the scented cedars, and the spreading vine, bearing clusters of purple grapes, over the glass walls and ceilings. The glass was in thickness some twenty-four inches, and of variegated colours, so that



under the rays of the fierce, hot sun the painted reflections fell everywhere around, and the temperature was most overpowering within. Gaudily-painted columns resembling unorthodox animals and various deities filled another chamber, the floor studded with rare and precious stones. From the vaulted ceiling of another apartment the stars at night were visible; while from many corners heads outstretched spurted from their ivory nostrils perfumes and sacred oils upon the occupants beneath.

Long galleries, leading into darksome crypts, with tiny cells embedded in the walls. Some of these enclosed sacred relics, such as teeth and portions of hair of the god Bel, necklaces and earrings of the martyred women consumed in the cistern of sacrificial rites, and the eyes of virgin heretics whose bodies had been mutilated before the presence of Bel, as an atonement for the desire to become men, and freedom from slavish bondage or insubordination. Slaves lay here about, thick-lipped Ethiopians, their bodies bedaubed with grease and vivid paint. Tattooed women spread upon coarse mats chewed beetle, and prepared storax mixed with opium. Everywhere abounded hangings of red and purple, fringed with yellow, while fastened to the walls around the various chambers were low stools and couches of brass and ivory, cushioned with small mattresses of goats' skin, allegorically bedizened with painted emblematical figures.

From the windows of the palace the eye looked out upon extensive shrubberies and little running valleys of irregular expanse, betwixt which the river, brilliant

as sapphire, wended into the great lakes. Tall palms, cypresses, and cedars spread their lofty crowns thickly together, forming a shade over the terraces and gardens laid out in pathways of dazzling whiteness, showing up the black bodies of the slaves as they passed thereon in striking contrast, grouped together.

In an oval chamber facing the river port of Susa, Isis and Zeresh her mother adorned themselves. The latter, a massive woman, of the daughters of Sparta, possessed all the love for gorgeousness prominent in her race. Her hair was set over rings of stiffly gummed wire, according to the custom of the Egyptians who led the modes of that day. These fell from her crown in so harsh an appearance as to resemble iron locks cast into a mould. Large jewels glistened in her ears and upon the saffron coiffure covering her head and neck, and her nose ring was set with a magnificent emerald of incalculable value. The rims of her eyes were painted white to enlarge their size, and her forehead wore the sign of Bel, *i.e.* a purple ape, deeply imprinted into the skin.

A negress here tended Isis, and prepared the girl to bathe. A marble bath half filled with pure palm oil was set in the midst of the chamber, into which a eunuch poured some strong perfumes, a little alum, and a pink mixture of storax, and she stepped therein, and was made ready for the feast.

The master of the mansion revelled in the banquetting chamber, wherein assembled the mighty as well as the highest in all the metropolis. Out in the courts of the palace kids and huge beeves were roasted for consumption. Peacocks stripped of their

plumage were set in dozens upon long spits and served to table garnished with gilded locusts and honey. Aman meanwhile sat in an arcade bevelled in the thick walls, the inside burnished with gold. A cistern of perfumed oil stood at his right hand, which he now and again laved the palms of his hands in, and spread over his scarbutic visage.

Absinöe, his elder son, mailed in costly armour and a tiger skin, but drunken with wine, sat before the lower bench, bawling his victory over the Assyrians, while he and his confederate brothers thrust their copious bowls into the tank of wine in their midst. Three heralds sounded a long clarion blast through their instruments at last, whereupon Aman arose, with spangled stars gleaming over his parti-coloured vestments.

"Followers," he said, suavely—welcome, thrice welcome! We congratulate ye that your prowess hath raised ye high in the land, and that the nations fear the name wherein ye stand now, defiant and proud, greatly to be feared, ay, like unto the blast of the great god Bel's curse.

"We have, I hear, in the city cells now four thousand captives. Let them be sold to the hewers of Lybia for labour, all—save the women; these confine to the discretion of the Persians, so that the harem may be replenished. Nevertheless, those of the women over forty confiscate to the god, for they are useless in the olive yards, or for brick-making; therefore make away with them as is customary if it be a wise decree. Judge ye yourselves.

"Behave with due clemency, 'Guards of the Legion,' unto those refractories from Smyrna, and those also

who *desire a Republic*, lest the populace become incensed by the sight of blood, but I have a different code of judgment to weigh over in the question of those calling themselves Jews. This will keep awhile nevertheless.

"Hecatompyle bringeth me papyrus from Lower Ethiopia, ay, from Egypt also, saying these herds arise again, and bring mischief by their non-submission and pride. They are accursed—accursed by the god's horns—and *shall be* punished, but with due discretion, since some of the women are fair."

A loud buzz of anger stopped his speech, harsh voices arose, crying, "Ay, ay, great Aman. So say it."

Some, rolling upon skins, dug their knives into the fleece in paroxysms of passion, muttering drunken imprecations to the unhappy race, though they were thus drunken and understood not. At the lower extremity of the room meats cooking upon the tripods caused a sickly odour to pervade everywhere around. Glass phials of balm oil, brought by slaves, were handed to the elders, who poured the same over the profusion of their hair, and let it trickle down their faces and necks.

More meats were served at intervals, also savoury fish stuffed with cinnamon and spices, and laid upon rough ewers of massive gold moulded in barbaric splendour, being spoil from various conquests. Music also pervaded the chamber, harsh shrill chords, wholly unmusical, save to the ear of the time. A sensuous vapour of commingled heat, voluptuous scents, and drunken revelry spread over all around. Some rolled heedless, grasping their cups in hand and calling for more drink, to the floor; others lolled forward, making

hideous gibes to themselves, knowing not why they did so.

At the Grand Chamberlain's bench, moulded from purest ivory, were gathered the tetrarchs of the provinces around, satraps of high rank. The Magi, the same that sat to condemn the Median Queen Vashti (save Memucan the elder, whose place had been filled by his son of the same name, as since the deposition of the late wife of the King that aged lawgiver had died from the weight of years and long service in the state).

When Aman had spoken concerning the evil meditations he pondered in mind regarding the Jewish race, Carshena of the seven arose, and called forth loudly in response, as he was angered. "Hearken awhile," he said. "It may do well for all to hear generously. Behold, all ye who sit and eat, and drink the blood of the vine in the presence of the elders and the highest in the land; behold, the gods send us storms of wind and pestilence, and the sibyl predicts such in our day, none the less were all living, as One in the beginning of the earth's progress. Then the certain sons of our forefathers dispersed, and each took a portion of land, both of the inland and maritime countries, even unto the islands some resorted, and organised their own nations and tribes; some called Galls, from Gomer of the tribe of Ham who rode upon the waters of the great flood; 'Magog,' too, founded the Magogites, whom the Greek assume as Scythians; from Thobel came the Thobelites; and from the ancient Madai, son of the giant Japhet, came the Medes—the powerful Medes."

"A lie!" shouted a long-haired warrior, clenching his fists. "Media ruled long under the Æolian gods ere such as ye predict and teach us from thy book lore."

"Silence, O fool!" said Carshena, with contempt, a gravity spreading over his countenance. "As Riphath, whom the said Jews quote, originated the Paphlagonians, so did Madia the Medes. Let the warlike among us take to hostile sciences alone, not question the language of the learned which applies to those who have no war at heart, but a more profound knowledge of things."

"Hail, Carshena!" echoed a dozen voices among the throng, so that the Median warrior fell sulkily upon his skin again, and said no more. "Hail!" they reiterated.

"Thus," continued Carshena, "did the world become spread widely, and several went forth to the extremities and took up their abode also. Now, concerning these Hebrews, as such are called in the laws, these are they which are quoted as filth upon the earth, but which none the less are as just and commendable a people as any, since they come from the ancient Heber or Hûd, whose genealogy is beyond the limit of explanation now, save that so as all the provinces, cities, and countries throughout the earth are populated by the sons of early days; so all these people are liable to the *same justice*, to decent treatment and consideration from the hands of all in every land."

Carshena's boldness took his six colleagues by surprise. They bent forward, gazing intently upon him;

but Aman, seeing the clemency of Carshena in the matter of the Jews might work havoc in the susceptible minds of those assembled, arose again in a frenzy, flung his silver spatula at the speaker, and bade him cease; "for," said he, "thou speakest treason to the great King, wherein thou dost harbour friendliness unto this traitorous tribe, who seek all the land for their own. A curse is upon thee! for this scum arose from the dregs of humanity, and are made to be destroyed as the brute creation. Let *me* recount the tale of mine own generation concerning these upstart evilmongers, and be ye then convinced, and take seats in silence. Now, give ear unto us."

Drinking a copious draught from a golden bowl before him, and placing a portion of pomegranate between his thick lips, Aman commenced—

"Now, O Medes and Persians, and the rest, devotees of the mighty Bel, and followers of your several gods, hearken unto me, for I have well noted these people, and am thus prepared to show unto ye all their wickedness as upon the readings of the papyrus or the skins of parchment. Now this unruly community are to be *slaves of men*, inasmuch as if dominion be given them, they abide not in their place, but arise as kings themselves, and become loathsome from their insubordination alone.

"From the God Noe this race takes stand upon the earth verily; but as I set forth, they are of the *meanest*, and are made for destruction, as some are. Behold, were they not burned in the city of Sodom from the wrath of the Sun before, and one alone fled from thence alive to re-establish the race again. In after

years they re-populated and gathered themselves together yet again, awhile worshipping the unfathomable, of space, and calling unto their unseen God; then some left and followed Dagon and Ashtoreth, and the Assyrian god Oben Ra, who delivered them in mighty matters of war oft. They possessed their valiant men once, and built white palaces for their chiefs like unto the King's. They made themselves conspicuous against nations and set rife in sailing up the Tigris to the walls of Nineveh in presumption and derision, like very monarchs.

"Listen longer," he continued, seeing the mass of his hearers were now intent upon his words, and some were uttering smothered ejaculations. "This is one of the assaults that this legion of evildoers wrought in mine own race. 'Twas a wise decree of the forefather of Pharaoh Sesostris to organise and command the destruction of these people in the bud; and but for their sacred scribes, would the whole nation have been laid low, and the sands of generations covered them many centuries since; nevertheless, they sprang again up through the cunning of a certain Hebrew, who caused his son to come under the notice of Thermutis, the King's daughter, who took him a babe from the Mo. Howbeit, this worked magnificently to the cause of the land, as the Chaldeans knoweth; for this germ springing from the Hebrews, warred against the Ethiopians our fellows, followers of Sohail.

"Now to gain the daughter of the King of the Ethiopians to wife, he sold himself to a woman, and got for reward the hatred of the Egyptians, whereby he left their gods and went over to the

unknown Deity, whom this people swear by, and still worship and teach of."

As he spoke, an Ethiopian toparch arose; and casting, with an oath, his conical cap of office to the ground, demanded—as well as his speech could articulate—"Tell us, O Aman, of these fools, and what they did to thine own race, that we may revenge upon them for thee.—Yea, Aman! Why dally with tales like unto which Artapanus hath breathed upon the reeds and papyrus long since, and the scribes of Heliopolitaus left us for our heritage accounts of all the abominations, and the strange fables of this very race? Something later, O wise Aman, that which touches thyself, for we would hear it and avenge—avenge!"

"True, ye shall," responded the Chamberlain, as he caught at the evident enthusiasm of this Ethiopian eagerly; for it was understood the Ethiopians hated the Hebrews cordially, and they possessed the vindictiveness of the ancient Memphites, which was proverbial throughout the land everywhere.

"Replenish the cups," said Aman to the wine-bearers; "and thou, Castro, send the fly-flappers hither to attendus. I am bitten already. So, O followers, will I, as ye request, bring to your minds the injuries which I, as an Amalekite, suffered in the past, by the recollection, biting as a serpent's tooth, and in the present, that the very bones of my forefathers cry out, 'Vengeance! vengeance!' from the shades of Gobolitis and Petra unto me, and I hear, and reply, 'Yea, it shall be so; it shall be so!' Hearken yet again. It was near unto Choreb the mountain that my fore-

father Amalek, well learned, discreet, and wise in good understanding, had assembled with his followers to punish the whole body of these wretches who had gathered in great masses to do battle and carry away spoil with ravage in that season. My forefathers sat before our race governing, as wise and able statesmen. Our lands were our heritage, and our riches innumerable. We possessed the mightiest men-of-war, arrow and javelin bearers, catapult throwers, axemen, ay, we also possessed some of the strange anthropophagi in the ranks, who could feign death and appear as headless corpses, for the reason that their heads, as thou hast known, grew beneath their shoulders. These followed the Sun god, and dwelt amid the rocks in the mountains, were strictly versed in utilities of war, and joined our forces in great numbers to our assistance. Traditions, and the diaries of our forefathers, relate how these Israelites sent imperious messages, calling us impostors, claiming the land as their own, and exhorting us to deliver up the provinces unto them, with tribute, according to their judgment. Whereupon this Hebrew, "*Mouses*,"¹ a hireling, but raised to certain dignity beyond his station, who had hitherto worked such havoc with the Egyptians, set forth with his colleagues, and prepared themselves to do us battle.

"Then in the eve did this craven forsake the hosts, and apportioned the same unto the charge of another; for he stood aloof, calling unto his unseen God, and watched the slaughtering in the valley below, for fear and trembling.

¹ Moses. See Josephus.

"Followers, soldiers, toparchs, and ye all assembled, as the aforesaid manuscripts left me by my race (seeing I am a lawful descendant of kings) do testify, this scurrilous people gathered together the sacred Ibis which they invoked against all barbs poisoned by serpents' stings, so that the shafts against them became harmless. So it happened, they came down upon us from the hilltops in numbers too vast to enumerate; they sprang up in dozens from crevices in the surrounding rocks; and for multitudes, were as the sand in the desert of Arabia.

"Thus they overcame us from sheer main force and devilry, the whole of my race, saving a certain few who succumbed in body and mind to the enemy. So they then mutilated us, as though we were dung upon the ground, acquired our riches, our vessels, slaves, women, brazen images of high art, and our armour, with the embroidered garments and skins of our priests. They drove us naked before the storm, and bound us as slaves in chains, and rendered us to what level they themselves had been—scum—and made us as dirt unto them for generations to follow.

"Now, hark ye, I, Aman, *am an Amalekite*, as ye know, from the fallen ashes of my race, am I designed to avenge our wrongs; and, by the horns of Bel, do I hanker to see them laid low, and no more upon the face of the earth.

"This is but equitable, albeit our liege King (may he live for ever!) deals too leniently with these people. Who goeth in my cause?" he called forth excitedly, raising his head above the mass, and extending his arm, encircled by massive bracelets—"Who?"

A crystal pendulum overhead was now lighted, as dusk was setting over the feast.

"Who?" he cried again; "who goeth with Aman the Amalekite? for, behold, when all is accomplished, and this race is no more, shall great recompense be given to all who follow the King and the cause in the land now uppermost by *me*."

Some leaped up, fired by an impulse of passion, these semi-barbarian idolaters, who knew not the meaning of Aman's words, save that they hankered for blood and warfare, with the aggrandisement of heroes for some fresh exploit. Many responded in half-drunken revelry, blustering with choked articulation the desire to go out and exterminate the hated race at a word from their commander, if so be he utter the same. Others, in derision, screamed out to their fellows to keep silence, while they beat their shields, carrying the image of their god upon the brazen benches before them, in utter recklessness, to quell other voices save their own. Many, whose faces, bedaubed with vermilion, lay upon the ground, biting their lips, until the blood flew, and calling for drink frantically. But Aman continued, significantly—

"This is a feast for the friends of *my race*, and for the priests. Keep proper silence, therefore; and ye who are of the State, also be wary, lest ye are carried away by the machinations of these scurrilous people. Nevertheless, what I testify, I testify as mine own, requiring no manner of favour thereunto, save that which is accorded to me by many believers. Now no more of the traitor, no more of warfare until such be our duty. Let the music sound, for the lady

Zeresh cometh hither, I see, by the falling of the ball upon the cupola of her house. Behold, also doth my daughter attend this feast with her priests. Look ye, gather ye up the cups, and make silence to reign on their coming. So shall the sports commence. See, yon door is open, and they advance, as I said, to join us."

The eastern lattice of ivory in the evening shadows revealed a train of silent forms wending their way hither. These were arrayed in long, white tunics, and came slowly forward, sounding the dumb timbrels, fifty aside, of the dictates of the goddess Ashtoreth, each shaven and tattooed with blue. Upon their heads was raised a strange ornament, resembling a cock's-comb, which gave to their visage a more hideous expression, and they carried some small incisors, with which they now and again struck their thighs, moaning plaintively the while.

A woman, having a yellow mantle, long and cumbersome, composed of the plumage of the golden Reis, walked between these silent men. Her visage was proud and cruel; she might have been a black statue arrayed for inspection for the stolidity of her bearing in general. Rows of costly amulet beads encircled her head, neck, and legs, and over her face was stretched the customary veil of the Persians, revealing only her lip-ring and the tattooed chin customary in her race.

This was Zeresh, Aman's wife. Two eunuchs, beardless, but gorgeously arrayed, walked at her heels, bearing huge feathered fly-flaps, bandelets, and wands of office. Long symmetrical curls fell upon their bare shoulders, bedaubed with odorous grease, and they had the faces of women.

Then came two slaves of the daughter of Aman, with loin cloths of goats' hair, who bore upon their heads a winged figure of the goddess Ashtoreth. Two fan-bearers walked backwards, creating a breeze in the sultry air for the pleasure of Isis, who came with a woman, who carried her outer garments and perfumes for her use.

She wore a purple robe, inlaid with moons of gold, which was slit to the hips on the right, and revealed the gauze of her under habiliments at every movement of her limbs. A deep, heavy fringe of silver weighed down this tunic, which glistened as she moved at every turn ; while her silver anklets made a musical sound, sweet and peculiar to the ear. She also wore a long veil under an Egyptian tiara of sacred elephants' teeth set in gold, and sandals of pearl were upon her bare feet.

Fifty acolytes of the goddess came at her side, walking in a long train, and thus they came to the banqueting chamber of her father.

The hosts uprose immediately, and a murmur floated in the air. Zeresh passed upon the dais to witness the sports, but the daughter of Aman stood upon the blue-paved stones, silent and irresolute.

"Come up, my daughter," said Aman ; but she essayed nothing, only stood motionless, trembling within.

The men now gazed upon her with a certain wonder. Some had been gaming, as piles of rough coins lay upon the benches around. She looked up at last absorbingly upon the huge cedar beams, as though astounded, murmuring strange incoherences, as if in extreme pain.

"Astarte," she called softly, "queen of the firmament, behold I am conflicted, and my acolytes bring me no remedy, as I surmised. I burn, and there is no oil to soothe my wounds, and I cannot conceive why this is." Her tones dwelt strangely upon the ears of the men after the recent uproar among them. They seemed absorbed with a curious softness, their savageness for the time being quelled.

She spoke again plaintively: "In the dwelling yonder I sought relief, my sacred cell grew dark, and gibes came through the walls as though to mock at me. Bel, the god of my father, then grew angered, in that I sought the great Zidonian goddess, who so commanded me, and now I suffer, for even man hath, I see, the power, and I know no refuge. Is a God higher than all? If I speak to the Asp, it answereth me nought now. Ay, bring me the lotus that I may smell it and die ere long, for I am as nothing but dust, though I be called the daughter of Aman, and live well in the land."

They came near, bringing soft skins now for her to lie down upon, but she rested upon the bosom of her slave. By a fluted column her priests and attendants took their stand. She spoke but little, nevertheless; in compliance to the decree of the assembly she drank from a brazen horn some red wine.

A Babylonian toparch now regarded her intently in sullen abstraction. He drew very near to her instinctively, and watched the outline of her features through the veil curiously. He was circumspect withal, less drunken than the rest, and intent upon the surroundings.

While the majority of the men gathered about the

Grand Chamberlain and busied themselves in offering congratulations to him for his great advancement, he embracing many the while, she stood irresolute, as in a mythical wonder. From the vaulted roof at last her eyes descended upon the assembly, and they looked upon the Babylonian with an air of weariness. He started, and his lips moved, though no sound was articulated.

~ Pontiffs of the several deities sat irregardless upon ivory seats, the rich, elders, governors, and the great men of the city, full of pleasure, disporting themselves as they pleased, until the trumpets in the courts without gave a loud fan-fare, intimating the sports were about to commence.

They brought tigers bereft of their hind legs to fight with men, polecats from Egypt were set to torment naked Lybians, and many horrible devices customary to the age was resorted to as amusements. Lastly, Aman commanded the two other sacred serpents to be brought in. These reptiles were kept in the palace, specially blessed by the god, and calculated to be endowed with spiritual discernment to detect infidels, whom they destroyed instantly.

"Bring forth two of the she-slaves of Smyrna from the city cells," Aman shouted, while all eyes curiously observed him.

It was done, and the slaves of the outer court came after a short space, with the women destined for the sport. Despair was so visibly depicted upon their wretched countenances, that they had the appearance of hunted creatures bereft of reason. They wore no other apparel save a cloth to cover their loins; their hair was matted together in coarse



lumps; and their bodies fastened by means of a ring, caught in the fleshy part of their arms, the ends firmly brazen and joined, that they were forced to move together at every step. A similar iron ring was run through each of their lips, so that they were unable to speak or cry out, and to this ring was attached the cord which dragged them into the presence of the whole assembly, where they were let loose like cattle to the absolute mercy of the tormentors, or whatsoever horrid penalty was to be imposed.

They turned instinctively from side to side together, seeking some signs of commiseration and pity. They seemingly possessed no power of themselves. Many of them were too helplessly weak through the sheer exhaustion and ill-treatment experienced during their captivity.

Isis now apparently viewed them with more concern than the rest. She knew they had come to the feast merely in gratification of the sordid appetite of man for cruelty and an ignoble vengeance. She also saw, twining around the cedar pillars, her father's sacred serpents, their bespotted skins gleaming in the misty light, whilst in a circle were the twelve Pontiffs of "Bel," robed in yellow and scarlet, ready to give sentence.

"Who were these solitary creatures, called women? Who, moreover, reared those hordes of creatures, composed of flesh and blood like unto herself, who toil like brutes in the streets of the city, in the vineyards, and olive groves, and markets, with the hope of nothing certain save death, and a grave in the dust heaps of the metropolis at some early date?" thus she asked herself.

She looked meanwhile upon her hands, her fingers delicately tinged with henna. She felt the pressure of those fingers one upon the other. She knew she was flesh like unto them, with feelings, body, soul, and being, tumultuous like unto the rest, and she was also *a woman*. With beseeching glances her eyes again sought those of the victims before her. She knew and felt the consciousness of man, that omnipotent lord, and her soul grew troubled, because she was in a vastly different sphere; yet, withal, a part component with these tormented creatures, and unable to command their release, or in any wise aid them in their calamity.

The shaven priests of Bel called out in humiliating obeisance that the presence of the god was amid them, thus sanctifying the sports: "Behold, hath he not bow and quiver, and goeth forth at seasons to the chase yet now, and is present?"

"The sun and moon and stars are subservient unto him, for he ruleth the universe, governs the wills of rulers, and permits no woman to unveil before him in open derision and rebellion."

"Let the asps of the temple consume them," shouted the multitude; "let us witness their death. Such as these are born to be destroyed, and the divinity hath no claim to them, nor desireth their lives, souls, or bodies."

Isis sank down upon her knees, cold as the marble stones beneath, and full of piteous trembling. She saw a mass of twirling distortion writhe and dart into the midst of the arena, as the reptiles were loosed; a bluish film gathered before her sight, through which

she detected the myriads of people, like gibing spectres in the distance.

The yellow black-speckled bodies of the snakes were already upheaving in great wide curves to spring upon their prey, their golden eyes gleaming like electrical lights through the mist. She shivered, and became pallid from sheer sympathy; she longed to appeal to her father for clemency, or flee from the sight of her fellow-sufferers, and shut her eyes from the thing which riveted those masses within the great house of her father. Then a shout arose, a loud buzz of gratification, mingled with a bitter shriek of pain and death. A serpent had already bitten the throat of one of the women, and held its poisonous fangs firmly thereon.

Yet another shriek issued from the lips of Aman's daughter—

"Take it away! Take it away! O Babylonian, why gaze upon me, and knowing *I too am a woman?* And ye see these, like women unto me, suffer and die!"

Simultaneously the man sprang to her side. The appeal came to his ears like a voice from out the tomb. He fell before her, bowing his head. "*I am too a Babylonian,*" he said, "O daughter of Aman. Notwithstanding the god requires it, yet I am also conflicted because of these, and I read thy soul."

Her veil fell from her face, loosened, revealing her beauty, for she became insensible, and her mother commanded her to be enveloped in her mantle and taken hence from the sight of the feast instantly. Tam-bourines flourished, and wild, half-fiendish shouts

prevailed, as the two eunuchs bore her away from their midst. The Babylonian, however, stood at the doorway watching her disappear sadly.

"Let us go," he said at length to a chief of Greece. "Arise! I have a vision which tortures me, and I can bear no more.—What of the women?" he asked, half stupefied. "How hath it been with them?"

"They are dead!" returned Malgua, in sombre tones. "The sport was too short."

"Ay, dead," he muttered, "and yon maiden is the daughter of Aman! I never met like unto her yet. She had the soul of the slaughtered women written on her face, and sank down because of pity for them. Such as she do men wage war with nations for. She compels the bodies of myriads, and" (dreamily) "I saw her face. Her eyes fell upon me, and I answered them. Malgua, I answered them."

He mused again: "Find for me her sanctuary, that I may look upon the stars that light upon her roof and that speak of her eyes." And as he spied in the distance the white-robed train disappear, he turned his head to the revelry within, and spoke sharply again: "Let us go hence, I say. I would speak with thee privately."

And they walked forth together. But the hosts within were pledging Aman the Amalekite, irregard-less of the outer world. Therefore the two men hesitated not to leave the throng. They passed through the courts out into the city square, and entered the house of Mardocheus the Jew. And it was then nearing midnight.



CHAPTER III.

THAT MAN OF ANOTHER NATION.

MARDOCHEUS lived in Susa the Palace, as the Persians designated their metropolis. He now took possession of a small tract of ground in as close proximity to the walls of the Queen's house as possible, where he reared himself a small habitation suited to his studies, and where he could also look out from the roof-top upon the home of his child, and remember it was but the walls of her high station that awhile separated them, for her people's justification alone.

Since the execution of the two traitors, Gabatha and Tharra, and in consideration of the service he had done unto the King, Mardocheus had been filling a certain *more* honourable position near the Council Chamber.

The monarch, impulsive and generous at heart, had intended that a reward of a more significant nature should be given to the man to whom he owed his life, and made certain note of the same ; but the pressure of Aman's politics, and the many moral sorceries brought to bear upon his impulsive nature, brought about entire forgetfulness of the act.

The Jew was daily apportioned a standing in the

Palace, however. He was consigned to certain duties of notable worth ; and while remembering this, the King had forgotten that this very man, beneath the scourge of a bitter enemy's persecution, and fleeing before the winds of adversity, was, a short time back, the saviour of his life and person, and that he stood yet still silently unrewarded in his place.

Thus this man, a scion of the house of Benjamin the favoured, now helpless, unaided, and alone, was bearing the brunt of the scourge manfully. Here, in his small chamber, letting in the glimmer of the stars and the refulgent light from the moon-world overhead, he worked to compile and complete the Jewish Talmud, commenced by his ancestors, men of brains, wisdom, and note, during their Babylonian captivity of seventy wearisome years in the past, besides their former miseries.

When in silence and deep meditation he pondered the captures and ignominious treatment of his people, he had recourse to his manuscripts, wherein were detailed the origin of the tribes, the national leads, the generations of the Kings from Saul the first ruler, unto the conquering of Israel by the Assyrians. Then the bitter anarchy, slaughtering of the host, the struggle of the unhappy race on the other side for rightful vindication, ending in unhappy failure and slavery, and at this date the wailing of the people because death was daily stealing to their very thresholds, and sweeping his scythe over their fields of humanity with terrible dexterity.

The Babylonians had been their last masters. Though the good Cyrus had done his best, he passed to sleep with his fathers. New kings, new enemies

arose, and once again was the nation, the whole descendants of Heber the son of Selah, who had walked before the high God, ay, with the men of Judah, the leading national name, in sure jeopardy, crushed by suffering calamity, bitter martyrdom, and it seemed that they now were forsaken by their God. In the hour of their bondage, in strawless brick kilns, and on the reedy banks of the river they were to die the death of an ignoble destruction by the hand of the wicked and the idolater.

They had sojourned in the land of the living God from the days of their creation, in struggles and adversities they had walked the wilderness and desert places, drinking the waters of the Tiber, the Jordan, the Chebar, and Euphrates in bitter sorrow. Wrapping around them in the blasts of stern adversity their cloak of nationality yet more tightly, looking forward to home, though ever wandering away from home, ever going from their resting-place, yet always sighting it ahead through all vicissitudes and perils.

Astrologers of Babylon, Magians, had come to this man Mardocheus amid their confictions of late. They had told him of the dictates of the *Chartumin*,¹ and other wonderful manifestations of the wise in the land. They even urged him also to cast for them spells to thrust out evil spirits, which were known to beset desert places wherein they abode. Thus they had faith in him. Even some of the sheepskin-clad people, a pastoral race from the midst of the mountains in Asia, star-worshippers, sent him presents, and besought him to tell them the secret of how the forty thou-

¹ A sect of magicians then existing.

sand once dwelt in the wilderness so many generations, and were fed and clothed in so mysterious and wonderful a manner by their God. For the strangeness of their peculiar mode, and the marked manifestations given of the guidance of some supreme power over their whole concern, nevertheless were the Jews looked upon with certain suspicion. A grave fear spread from out the fire of jealousy, "lest perchance," the superstitious argued, "this God who rules these people smite us, therefore have nought with such."

It was a hard axiom of Fate—How the mighty awhile are uplifted to work in the land, and after their day of labouring, they are known no more.

Mardocheus looked upon the walls awhile. Arranged above him were strips of dried skin, rows of reeds sewn with great exactness together, and rolls of dried papyrus. Upon one of the latter, placed in a conspicuous place to meet the gaze, was imprinted some legible lines of reading. It was as though an instinct, very forcible, had intuitively directed his glance thither, and the words thereon read thus :—

"Copy of an epistle sent by mine hand unto one '*Dosetheus*' of Jerusalem, to be interpreted to our people there by Lysemachus the Levite for their comfort, being captives like unto myself, but from which tribulation shall the God of Israel presently deliver us, as is shown forth beneath.

"Behold, I am a Jew, being the son of Jairus, of the tribe of Benjamin, and I was in Babylon in the toils with Jechonias, King of Judea, in the past. Howbeit, I came hither to dwell in Susa the palace, for I was called by the spirit of my conviction, and am a servitor now in the great King's court ; and, behold, this is a dream which hath troubled me greatly, for thereby am I shown what God is determined to do for Israel



at this season of our tribulation, and thereof am I the more desirous to show it unto thee, who art of the faithful.

“And it was night time, when I heard a great tumult, with thunder and earthquakes and uproar in the land.

“And, behold, two dragons came forth ready to fight, and their cry was great.

“And at their cry all nations were prepared to do battle, that they might fight against the *righteous people*.

“And a day of tribulation, darkness and obscurity, affliction and great uproar, came upon the earth.

“Whereupon the whole righteous nation was troubled with fear of their own evils, and were nigh unto death. Then they cried aloud unto God, and upon their cry, as it was from a little fountain, there came a great flood to cover the earth with much water and gladness.

“And the light came forthwith. The sun rose up, the lowly were exalted, and these all devoured the glorious.

“This was my dream, the signification of which troubled me awhile, until in mine eyes the light came, and I saw the work of our God for Israel. And, behold, this is my interpretation of all, that ye may learn, ‘A little fountain became a river, and there was light, and the sun, and much water.’

“*This* river is Hadasseh they call ‘Esther,’ whom the King hath married and made Queen.”

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Upon the next scroll to this letter was another handwriting, less legible, but signed with Chaldaic precision. The Jew’s eye followed the characters:—

“To Mardocheus the Jew, writer of my Court, and unto whom I have respect, greeting. Thus hath it become known to me how certain emissaries sent from my court of jurisdicture,

have wilfully misused my judgment, and have gone against the just decree issued by my mouth, for the wellbeing of the Jews assembled in Jerusalem and surrounding provinces. That these people shall live in peace and safety, I hereby require all loyal subjects of my state to recognise the aforesaid Jews as fellow-subjects and well-wishers of our body and state. And I hereby commission by my hand and royal seal Mardocheus our servitor to investigate all the causes which concern this nation, and commit the same unto us at our Court.

"Written by the hand of Casdem the scribe, and signed,

"(XERXES) K·V·V·K·I·V·I·A
"THE KING"

This was a relic of the late great King's clemency, but a past. He now seemed buried in deep reflection, seemingly coursing with memory's fleet steps over the area of that past, when brighter moments had shadowed them. Left alone in captivity, the last of his generation, Mardocheus, the learned man of his illustrious race, in gloomy silence contemplated the stupendous and innumerable laws that bound his luckless nation to life and the land to their heritage.

Over the great skins composing his Talmud, delineating his nation, the numberless tribes, their distinct origin, and where these first set their feet. Of the founders of the mighty Pyramids, of the first fixed social and political status of great Egypt, the pomp, rise, and fall of the Kings, from the early generations until now, added to these chronological facts, were the beautiful stories of Abigail, Michal,



Haggith, Syloth, and Nicaulis of Egypt, known as the Queen from the East; also of Huldah the prophetess who had dwelt in the College of Jerusalem, and who journeyed to the King Josias and predicted with veracity all the evils that should overtake him; and lastly, the intrepid and courageous Judith, the beautiful widow of Bethlula, who went forth armed with her wit and beauty alone, and conquered the warlike captain of Assyria, and saved thereby her nation and her honour. These were records of women of Israel, women whose devotedness to their people and creed committed acts proverbially more heroic than womanly, but which acts nevertheless were consecrated by the highest and most sanctified in the land, as worthy of the utmost gratitude and hallowed benedictions. The sanguine Nebuchadnezzar had since pillaged the temples of Jerusalem, razed its walls, and led captive all Israel. Cyrus the Wise then set forth a great example of wisdom after in emancipating the race, and thereby endeavouring to throw a little light over their darkest times, when he ordered the rebuilding of the sanctuary, and sent the Hebrews back to their rightful possessions in peace and safety. Darius and Xerxes, his descendants, did their best to second these clement views of their progenitor, but a darker cloud began to spread again over the horizon of their peace.

Now in the early reigning years of Artaxerxes was all the old woes rife among them. The Jews no longer were sovereigns of themselves, but hunted by sanguinary task-masters and cruel persecutors, sorely destroyed by their enemies, as sheep that have no shepherd, and

dying by thousands the death of the malefactor and traitor in the bye-ways.

Mardocheus was well versed in all concerning his race. He held unwarrantable, clear, and marvellous proofs of all from the time of the great war, when generations repeopled the vast universe; but he was a man given to deepest reflection and seasons of grave ponderings, though it chanced that never until this time had aught so terrible and momentous controlled his intelligence as now.

On the face of the earth he had trod for so many years in the fear of his Creator, his eye in the flesh saw imprinted in letters of blood, "*The climax of the Jews has now come;*" for the name of Esther is to be imprinted upon his own great list early. He knew it and pondered, though strange gods prevail, and death is at hand to the trembling in spirit.

Then in the midst of visionary dearth, the slavery of women, and the hatred of men polygamists, his eyes uplifted through the lattice of his chamber, and fixed themselves in agony of thought upon the gleaming stars set in the firmament above. A smile momentarily spread over his visage, his lips moved in silent observation.

The Lord God saith, "Not so, O my people. Wait! for deliverance is nigh, and ye know not."

As he spoke inaudibly, and he was minded of the promise, Zillah came through the entrance and spoke to him with some consternation. "Brother, two men of the city are here," she said. "They wish speech with thee. Shall they come hither?"

"Yea, bring them in," he said gravely, after a moment. "Look they from the Palace, Zillah?"

"They are ritualists," she answered; "but one hath the appearance of a governor, for he wears the purple."

"Go," he replied, "say Mardocheus is within. It may chance I know them; and if not, then shall I nonetheless speak to them unrestrained. If they be great men, let it be still remembered that there is naught of liberty or social greatness that is intrinsic, or accidental, but that which is in unity and of *spiritual vitality* alone. If these be not this, they are nothing. Still, friends or enemies, bring them hither. The time is short, be it for our salvation or our death, and I can bear the best or worst unto my God."

In the space of some few seconds Zerobabel, with Malgua the Grecian chieftain, entered, and Zillah, departing, left them alone with her brother.

There was an absorbing silence, for the noise from the streets below did not penetrate into the solemnity of this quiet and mystic cell. It seemed apart.

The Babylonian bared his dark head, revealing more perfectly his tanned and marked features, standing out in striking contrast to the pale-faced Greek, who kept in the rear, toying with his jewelled javelin in a dogged fashion.

"Whom came ye to see, and from whence deputed?" inquired the Jew, with utmost placidity, standing erect.

"We sought *one* master, of whom much has been

discoursed concerning in both the past and present," answered Zerobabel, with his customary hauteur and self-command—"one who, we hear, served the late King faithfully, and tarried years in alliance with the Court, and conformed certain rules for the Hebrews when under dominion of the nation. Though my race and I follow the god of the land and of our fathers, such capacity belongeth unto us alone, and we trouble none as a race, notwithstanding much animosity is assumed by the Fire-worshippers against these said Hebrews or Jews. But I perceive the man I seek is before me—Mardocheus the ruler and scribe. *Thou* art the man. Stay, one word more. I come from no person—king, tributary, or state—but as a man seeks man; so seek I thee, that I may speak to thee, not as that which some term a *chasaph*,¹ nor to learn thy skill as a wizard (which some say is synonymous in thee). I have that capacity for ignoring the subjects which rise against the creed of my country. Think it not I would speak unmindfully, for I hear thou art a wise man, and I credit not the words of the world in general, but came hither to witness with mine own eyes in the quietude. Since I open my mouth with the words of truth, lest the gods smite me; and, moreover, therefore I see clearly, lest the eye of Bel otherwise pierce me. I conjure you, answer me, and without prejudice or that bitter animosity they say thy heretic race beareth unto us, as a mighty nation."

A smile passed over the face of Mardocheus. The Babylonian's voice fell. "Thou expoundest thy mission

¹ "Poisoner," from the Hebrew.

well," he said after awhile; "but *I* alone am not a judge of the supreme mass of humanity walking this earth, but by thy countenance thou art sincere so far. Thou seekest me, though the people call me a deviser of evils. Well, I alone can do nothing, 'tis true."

Both men started at the words and looked amazed, judging perchance Mardocheus spoke as one truly who comprehended unseen matters and worked legendary lore to his own purpose, as all suspected.

He, however, waved his hand to stay their apparent speech, and proceeded: "Of myself I do nothing. Young men, I repeat, only by the aid of that God of the universe who ruleth all men, ay, every life, for He bringeth it into existence within thee even to work His will. Verily, therefore, expound thy thoughts; and if 'Bel' be with *thee*, as my God is within mine own body, then shall we bring what is right to the fore without any great controversy. Ay, speak, I pray, for I am ready and willing to answer to thee according to thy desire. Perchance ye bring a command from the King's Grand Chamberlain 'Aman,' whom the people worship; and if so, deliver it, that I may answer and act for my people who suffer under the cruelty and enmity of this man, and reply as my soul directeth."

Zerobabel answered: "No! No! I came not hither by the direction of Aman, but of mine own will. I did hear that three hundred women and children are lying captive in the dungeons of the city near, and some also in the tunnels under the Euphrates. Moreover, that two of

these have suffered death a little while ago at a feast in the house of Aman, whom the King loveth, is well known. But it was not because of this I sought thee, nor that I have ever previously felt pity for thy race—not that, but to warn thee from the inevitable decree of the King through my lord Aman, and to save thee from destruction, I come hither.” He waited, perchance to see the effect of his words, and note whether the Jew seemed moved. But Mardocheus bade him proceed. “Scribe,” he continued, “thou hast governed these people under displeasure for years, inasmuch as to thee, as a just man in the lore thou believest in, thou hast gained certain esteem of late. Listen, I have sat at the table of Aman to-night, ay, I witnessed the sports, and I felt no tremor or concern awhile until, looking up suddenly from the death of the victims, I beheld with mine eyes another woman beseeching me, with mute tones, to alleviate these creatures. Methought I was a stern and excellent witness for the god Bel hitherto until then, when my desire on the instant fled. I no longer continued looking for the obstacle in this unhappy people to be removed. Aman had said from the board that night, ‘The whole race are to suffer death and extermination.’ I grew timorous when the daughter of Aman pleaded to me, ay, for ye all, with piteous eyes. The Medes and Persians are not voluntary cowards, nor hard of soul unto an enemy even. Yet, for thine own safety and peace, I say, get ye all away from the land secretly. Escape while the words are yet in the throat of this man; for, by my soul, in three moons there will be no man left of thine when the word

for death is delivered." He stayed to unclasp a leathern sling from his girdle. Within the pouch lay a moonstone, with the sign of Bel engraved upon one side, and the King's seal upon the other. "This," he said further, "this, O Jew, will be a passport whithersoever thou mayest journey. Take it, and lead out thy people that are already unshackled; lead them out from sure death unto some chance of safety, I beseech, for there is no other outlet, no justice for any, but numerous pitfalls in preparation for ye all! Wilt thou take my words, and believe these?"

Mardocheus now seemed affected. He had sat in silence the whole of eventide, pondering some manner of escape from the clutches of the evil Chamberlain. He had failed ever to get within sight of the throne, or to make his supplication known unto the King himself. He (the King) seemed to repose absolutely in the dictates of his minister; and as it meant instant death to approach the monarch any nearer than the outer public court of the Palace, the Jew, like other servitors of the Court, was divided by a wide gulf from the presence, as well as the hope, of ever obtaining concessions before reaching the ears of that high functionary, ordained as next unto the King himself.

And Mardocheus was troubled. The expression of calm serenity that characterised him even fled from his face, and gave place to fitful gleams of despair, and momentary self-abandonment at that which came to him, for the Babylonian Zerobabel had spoken truth. His face portrayed the same, and his eyes were filled with an unwonted earnestness. Through the little window overhead the silver moon threw beams

of whitish light over the three men. No sound broke the stillness save a dismal howl now and again from the night dogs out upon the plains.

With palpitating chest and swelling tones, Mardocheus inquired, "And so, because of a woman's fanciful gestures, or a mere plaintive look, thou wert constrained to come to this house with thy tidings, young man. Wast that alone that moved thee? or did the spirit of mingled bravery and courage urge thee to pity? What, thinkest thou, Aman will require of thee if it cometh to his ears what thou wouldst do even *for us*?"

"I have weighed it, nor have I stayed to contemplate the result, O Jew!" continued Zerobabel. "Take my word and my actions as they are, remembering they speak alone of the man within me. I fight openly, I seek no quarter with enemies, but I pay as I receive. That I know a horrible slaughter will lay thee and thine upon the earth as manure, I am assured; therefore I came hither of mine own will, for I was stirred by a kindred sympathy with the daughter of Aman, inasmuch as she was inspired with remorse for the sufferings of her fellow-women, and so gathered I the same germ within me, which prompted my heart unto this place."

Then Mardocheus, glancing fully upon him, read his innermost soul at a moment. His brows knitted. "Thou lovest, then, this woman of Ashtoroth, the Zidonian goddess, the idolatress; and because of this thou desirest to gain her through the impressionable workings of her woman's heart, because of thy seeming self-sacrifice and clemency for our race. Nay, I will

accept no such clemency or pity, nor will I go out from this land *in secret* to escape the sword of the slayer because of it. But, stay, O chief, I have prudence, therefore I trust also I am able to keep above that which is stiff-necked or narrowed. Separated from home, country, and kindred, as many are of my people, I yet believe not in the omnipotence of *man* or kingdoms against the High God of Israel. I am a worker for my Maker, who is also thy Maker, and the Organiser of thy being. Hast thou no other matter to say, save that, by the promptings of this woman's looks, thou wert constrained to find me, and bid me urge my people to fly with ignominy from the persecutor? Nay, not so, not so. Thus we cannot do."

Zerobabel came forward with a bound, his dark locks shaking as he spoke with tumultuous pride, and lifted himself to his full height. "Hearken, Jew, what have I to gain by coming hither? Who would credit that Zerobabel, the Babylonian toparch and chief, could be enticed to plead to the hated of the nations to go out free? None! Yet you give me no leniency, you in turn treat me as a slave beneath you and say, 'Why do I trouble you about your own lives or your safety.' Formally I was a soldier, the son of an Edomite, possessed of much treasures and riches. We crushed all puerile despotism, and we revelled in a sturdy independence *of our own*. In the second year of the reign of the King I became a toparch, and I now command armies and vessels, and have dominion over thousands. Think not that I am a man to play at speech, or vain promises, or exhortations. I came hither because of firmness of purpose

alone, because of the desire uppermost to lend thee sympathy, for I felt the rending asunder of pride and enmity, inasmuch—and without shame I confess it—the kindred purpose did emanate from the sight of the daughter of Aman's grief."

Mardocheus, though encompassed with a thousand conflicting thoughts, raised his hand, and spoke with more leniency at the sight of this man's open enthusiasm. "Well, be it far from me to doubt thee, if thou art honest. The God of Israel so judge and reward thee accordingly; nevertheless, I go not out, I say, for if we are destroyed, the Maker of all shall have pre-ordained the same, and therefore we shall die and not live through that will. As to myself, I have no life away from my people and my God. Take the stone up, young man, I need it not, for I shall remain in this city until the rod of the destroyer strikes me with mine own. But that I have faith in thy words, I will pray the God of Israel to give thee light also in the truth, and deliver *thee also* in the day of tribulation."

"What dost thou do then?" asked Zerobabel, with a sudden impetuosity.

"*Stay here!* for" (with a solemn protest), "the little fountain became a river and a mighty flood, and this same is Hadasseh, whom ye know not yet."

He spoke allegorically, and they understood him not, nor did these men know aught of his relations to Queen Esther. They knew he was mighty among his own people, and credited that through his persuasion his followers stayed in their own places, though a severe bond-service was levied everywhere upon them, to their own suffering.

"Did he not speak of the King's new wife?" whispered Malgva to Zerobabel aside, "for it was known the Queen was so called before her marriage, though the Persians designated her now as *Esther*."

"Methinks not," returned the Babylonian. "Nay, like all these leaders of Judah, his mind is interwoven with strange phantasies and symbolical illusions. Silence, perchance he speaketh of some past with *himself*."

"If I can restore to thee then no chance of liberty or safety, I will go hence. I have given thee the decree, and I have so far set thee a channel of escape, whether thee and thine wilt flee or no. And, by Ismael, thou hast," continued Zerobabel, "had strange men to rule over ye all—men who have not been so mindful of the God thou dost mention as ruling thee now in adversity. Behold, was not Solomon of the East wise and mighty and rich, yet did he not worship at the shrine of other gods, and sacrifice in the sanctuary of Memphis? Ay, was he not called the high brother of the sun, and built a vast place for Chemosh of Moab, and for Moloch?"

"It was the struggle between mind and matter," answered Mardocheus, with the same calm gravity, "'tween spirit and wilful flesh, and it was for this example that the yoke was made grievous unto us in that day. It is no longer applicable, Zerobabel, nor does it justify our present woe and persecution. Solomon came from our noble forefather David, but we are now two tribes here since Judah and Israel. Our capital is Jerusalem, and Jerusalem our right. Tyranny and false prophets have devastated our possessions,

because we bow not in one huge body to the sacrilegious adoration of strange gods, and living men who walk the earth in the vesture of gods, because of the wickedness of a sordid and vengeful nature in the flesh. Go, sirs, I have said."

They made to leave the chamber, the Babylonian once only turning to look at the Jew. They saw him standing by the Talmud, his face raised heavenward, and his eyes burning like coals of fire lifted to the firmament, as though none saw him. A little space they waited silently aside.

"Perverse like these people," said Zerobabel sagely to Malgua, "and yet he will not go out free with his life; but surely this man is not an infidel, for he hath the nature of a god; see, he looketh yonder with the eyes of a priest and prophet, yet what worships he in the space wherein the human eye cannot penetrate in that mighty mist?"

"The moon and stars," said Malgua logically. "Look, he calleth to them, and will not confess it; but let him die, fool that he is, fool that for a word's sake alone will prefer silence and death to life and liberty. Come, let us go back to the wine and meat. This matter is nought of ours, to ourselves look wise whilst we can. Thou seest now thy folly."

And so they returned to the house of Aman and his guests that night.



CHAPTER IV.

THE KING OF PHRYGIA'S LETTER.

ARTAXERXES was restless upon his bed of skins. Hitherto had he been possessed of invulnerable serenity of vitality and thought, yet he was still discomforted. Long ago had thoughts of his former Queen Vashti been obliterated from his heart and mind; and in the present his youthful wife, whom he had chosen from her three hundred contemporaries, held his heart in absolute captivity, this new young creature. Yet she troubled him. She was unlike the rest of the women, anxious to court his smile or to crawl to his feet in subjection. She stood in a reverse light, and to him was infinitely superior, immeasurably loftier than any other of her sex. Instinctive insight into her movements told him she was of that peculiar race that ever brought trouble in the land, that harassed him, and so wrought against the nation's good. And still, was not Artaxerxes King, and master over all, all the hundred and twenty-seven provinces from Indus to Ethiopia? and consequently feared no man, God or King—none.

But he was now suffused with a hopeless eagerness. He turned his face continually towards the site of her white palace, and extending his arms, sighed. She had

never been desirous to seek him, standing rather afar off, and still shrank from his presence.

Why was this? His eyes now fell upon his guards. They were sleeping. Only an old servitor stood in the alcoved doorway, watching in the morning mists. Yet as he sprang from his couch, tossing aside the coverlids, the men awoke with a start, and looked confused that they had slept. The nearest fell forward before him, alarmed.

"Where is Bathzetha, my captain?" inquired the King. "Fetch him to me. Bring him hither within." He chided not the men nevertheless, for, like weasels, these slaves of the royal household lying upon beds of rushes were wont to sleep and awake at the fall of a footstep, or even a loud breath. The King knew he was safe.

Bathzetha entered with a huge spear, and two eunuchs with fly-flaps in the rear.

"Send the eunuchs away," the King said petulantly, returning to his couch. "Send them without. I want them not; and bring my diary, Bathzetha."

A vase was standing near filled with spiced pomegranate, and he took some, and lay back again in a restless fashion, while the officer did his bidding.

"Read me the entries," said the King on the man's return. "Decipher from about the second moon. Methinks I have not been diligent of late, and I must have something to divert my mind, else I grow weary of lying here. Read on, good Bathzetha. What saith the book, for I cannot sleep?"

Bathzetha then read, "Thus is it written, O great Nasr. On the fourth moon, at the third day, and the seventh hour, came the toparch of Tyre hither,



bearing choice agates and three bales of pure silken cords, from the Queen of that city, as a tribute to the great King, and a peace offering thereof.

"On the fourteenth day, at noon, Aman our Chamberlain communicated intelligence of the warlike tribes of Thebes being quelled after a large slaughter. Created Absinœ chief of Ischia, and appointed good Aman to be near me in person. [Sealed accordingly.]

"On the sixteenth day, and the wane, sought the Queen, and escaped the death of a dog through my Queen and the strange man of Israel whom she knoweth. Therefore a reward shall be bestowed by my hand upon this saviour of my life."

"Two slaves, Gabat —"

"Hold! Bathzetha!" shouted Artaxerxes, uprising, with the sudden impetuosity so usual in him. "Stay! There is the sore, ay, it hath troubled me this night until now. Not the slaves, but the man Mardocheus, I now remember, who rendered me so great a service then. Behold, until this moment hath the thing escaped me, nor have I rewarded one word of just favour upon that man. Give unto me the roll, Bathzetha? Give me hither my wax."

Then he set his ring seal thereon, and laid the book beneath the skins at his head, saying, "On the morrow surely this shall be done, lest I am again perplexed by reminiscences, as this night hath been. Nevertheless, I will not fail in my word, and will do *myself* the deed unto this just man, who is an alien and a stranger at our Court, and speaketh not. For this thing hath troubled me much until now, in that I have been lax, and was not minded of the thing."

He threw back his head and was motionless, awhile gazing upward. The captain of the bodyguard stood at the foot of the ivory couch; while the sleepers, fully astirred now, softly paraded the apartment, and sprinkled perfumes upon the walls and marble floor from a perforated chalice used for that purpose. A motion from the hand of Artaxerxes caused Bathzetha to move to the King's side again. He stood, pressing the palms of his hands upon his forehead in obeisance.

"Bathzetha!" he said, leaning upon his elbow, the fringe of his tunic falling upon the skins covered with purple linen brodered with stars. "Bathzetha!"

"O King, I listen. Thou canst command."

"From the turret yonder, over the cane garden, can be seen the Queen's palace. Look if thou seest the white guard upon the terrace yet, or perchance the women slaves about, and bring me word."

The man kissed the King's hem, arose, and ascended a spiral staircase from the east side of the chamber, from whence, looking over the quadrangle, could be seen the porphyry pillars, and the beautiful structure rising from the flower gardens like a mystic dwelling, which only imagination could erect. He returned in a short space, when Artaxerxes lifted his eyes from the inlaid floor, where they were lost in a reverie.

"My Lord," said Bathzetha, "I see no women astir, nothing but the gate-keepers at duty, and the rising of the sun over the plains."

"Good!" returned the King, "but sleep forsaketh me now, that day approacheth. Here, take my scroll and read again all I have inserted. Read on, good Bathzetha, yet further."



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And the officer continued to decipher the entries for some time.

* * * * *

Ere the servitors resumed their duties, or the customary files of eunuchs, with the apportioned slaves, and the auxiliaries of the King's Royal household, had been summoned to their several stations, Artaxerxes, enveloped in a mantle, arose and walked in the gardens. His head was bared of even the usual conical cap worn by the King alone, his dark locks floated heedless in the morning wind over his head and face, yet he cared not. He would stay to look at the growth of a cedar, planted by his own hand when, after the ignoble death of his brother, he had ascended the throne of Xerxes his father, and had at wonted seasons loved the culture of flowers. He gathered some ripe fruit from the clustering vine, and, sitting in a little arbour twined with mimosa, pondered his position.

The chief captain stood at the distance of a stradium from the King's presence, nor came nigh for fear of displeasure. Artaxerxes was known to enjoy certain moments of privacy when he walked forth at seasons alone, or to the Queen's house, as the case may chance.

In the courts of the Palace, as the hour waned, came the functionaries to their several works—scribes, captains, chiefs of provinces, and even citizens of repute from the countries around. This had no effect upon the stillness pervading the King's solitude. Murmurs began to fill the air, priests of the temples were chanting their morning hymn to the gods, and the Palace teemed with numerous monotonous sounds.

Shortly after the boom of the huge cymbals sounded upon the acropolis of the Capitol, three men came flying with hot haste to where the King sat. They were preceded by one clad in the vestments of a eunuch of position, and whose clean-shaved visage bore the sign of the house of Aman.¹ These approached the King's captain-in-waiting, and displayed great eagerness to communicate some important matter unto Artaxerxes alone. "For," said they, "our master Aman, second unto the great King himself, awaits our return in the inner Court of the Palace."

These couriers were accompanied by one begrimed with sand and dust, and more breathless with excitement than the rest. He carried a papyrus scroll covered with Phrygian characters. "I charge you," said the chief, "to remain here within call; I will carry your words to my lord the great King yonder in the garden."

While the man left these couriers furiously harangued together, as though an interminable struggle was tantamount within. One said, "Any allurement to capture these wretches, but first the great King *must know*."

The captain returned early, and led them into the alcove where the King was reclining heedlessly. An unusual pallor was spread over his face; but he motioned them, with a slight gesture, to advance yet a little.

Therefore was delivered the scroll of papyrus from

¹ Aman's followers were designated by the sign of an ape burned into the forehead with yellow.



the messenger's hands, and a seal from Aman. Prostrating himself, this one, who was a decipherer of characters, spoke.

"O King," he said, "Light of the universe, and Judge of the unruly, live for ever! Thus saith my lord Aman, and furthermore, craveth speech with thee, as tidings of great devastation are brought to the ears of the servants of my lord the great King—news of the infidels and imminent danger."

"From whence?" he asked them quickly. "Who doth send this?"

"The King of Phrygia, O King, with this roll behold, whereon is set the evils and the deed which threatens destruction, perchance, to thy mighty kingdom."

These words had instant effect, since Artaxerxes bounded to his feet, while the man crept forward and displayed the unrolled characters to his sight.

"Ha! which of ye beareth this from Phrygia?" he asked.

The bearer fell forward, kissing the stones.

"My hand bringeth the same, O King, great Nasr, Light of the universe."

"Where is Aman my Chamberlain?" he queried.

"Without, O King," answered the servant of the Chamberlain, "at the Court in readiness, only awaiting to discourse with my lord the King over this imminent matter."

"Begone then, and say, I come. Yet, stay, and bear your own message. But follow me," turning as he spoke to the Phrygian scribe and messenger; "thou follow me also; and thou, Carshena, lead the way."

They passed through the canes, and in some three paces drew near to the King's sacred doorway. I passed within, while the slaves in files were prostrate to their foreheads, and the King drew Aman and the courier within the sanctuary in silence. Here they read the message from the roll of papyrus, which ran thus :—

“King Antiochus to Artaxerxes our brother sendeth greeting and honour. It has come up into my ears, for the space of some months (and greatly as I desire peace with the Jews can no longer bear it), that this community settled in my country do scurrilously and surreptitiously usurp the position of the superiors ; and, moreover, those whom the King and co-religious dignitaries (such as the priests officiating in the Temple of the god Moloch and other high functionaries), whom I desire to :
in my name, that these people do moreover set forth hostilities, which require stringent punishment, lest the same grow to be uppermost in the lands.

“It is brought, therefore, to my consideration, after weighing the matter in mind with the elders of the city, that to forcibly eject these people from off the soil of my country is the only means whereby to insure our safety in general, and to our glory. Therefore, I beseech thee to withdraw those whom Xerxes thy forefather apportioned to stand within the city prior to my ascension to the throne from our dictate.

“Thus I send forth my desire, which desire I heartily commend to thine own wise discretion, and pray thee also consider with me the need for peaceful organisation, to exist between each country and in our several lands, under thy jurisdiction. Moreover, I have found these people stoical and perverse, given to evil mongering, and I have no further desire but to rid me of their name and presence for ever.

“Take care likewise of thine own nation. I send in good faith, having no danger of warfare with any other principality and feeling assured from hearsay that it is also for the gene-

good of contemporary kingdoms to be allied in this *one* important cause.

"From the Court of Phrygia, in the month of Peritius.

"(Signed) 'ANTIOCH~~E~~US' THE KING."

It was in this matter that Aman saw his way clearly to further agitate the already erring mind of the King of the land. His diplomacy was coached in the most subtle of speech, for his enmity accepted no manner of precaution. He was like his race, cruel and vindictive; and, moreover, this man had long experimentalised upon the mind and will of the populace, that his whole existence was now primarily carried away in the desire for ambition and self-aggrandisement to attain the highest seat.

Fortunately, for a while had the sequel to the two treacherous eunuchs' plot, and for which they expiated their crime before the city gates, and were picked piece by piece to death by the birds of the air, been forgotten. This plot, organised by Aman, and sealed by his promises of high reward to the perpetrators when the deed was accomplished, and he chosen chief ruler by the people, was not known save unto one, and this one was the Jew Mardocheus who bore the testimony. The Grand Chamberlain, and second ruler in the land, had an inkling of this however. He knew the secret power of this kinsman of the Queen, and for this very reason he trembled lest through some unbiassed medium she should learn all, and then lay bare Aman's choicest secret and most significant act of treachery before Artaxerxes.

Aman was, nevertheless, assured he should and could prevent this catastrophe happening. The

Jews he hated, and with these was linked Hadasseh, of their race, who must also not escape the work of his hands for claiming kinship to the bitter foes of Agag his forefather and his father's son alike.

Once the seal affixed to the decree of extermination, one sign of the King's name upon that death-warrant, and then the whole nation will be annihilated from the earth for ever. No future meddlers to potter with the dictates of the gods, that assigned to Aman the Amalekite the throne of Indus and Ethiopia; for with these Jews, though Artaxerxes little realised, would perish that fascinating and intrepid woman who had beguiled already the King's heart, Esther, whom he had married, dwelling not upon her race or lineage when he did so.

Aman, keenly also comprehending the havoc of late spread far and wide throughout the land through his instrumentality and those seasonable words in his own cause, such as none but a potentate could utter, observed through the futurity his most *ambitious desires* gratified. He could do much. He had long invoked the aid of Bel and his hosts. He felt mighty, and in the self-satisfaction of that mightiness he was certain of his success. Of the amalgamation of the people in appointing him "King" should Artaxerxes die in his youth, or early, as is required by the god often, he felt no hesitation to believe possible, for he was skilled, and had passed through the ordeals general in men of discretion and valour, to say nought of cruelty and craftiness, the great germ of his sordid nature.

"The Jews again!" murmured the King, with lowered head, after awhile, as if the weight of these unhappy people's doings bore down upon him in every shape

and at every turn, act as he would. "The Jews ; these dissatisfied Hebrews again!" he reiterated thoughtfully. "What dost thou think? I myself am confounded! Ay, I am weary of tidings which never refer to good of them, but ever of anarchy, evil, and bloodshed! What, therefore, sayest *thou*, wise and adroit Aman?"

"O King, I bow to *thy* decree, and without thee can I do nothing. But speak the word, and the whole nation shall be freed from these querulous people, who were ever setting the furies of wickedness rife among the innocent ones *in the past*; but speak the word now, or inscribe the decree, and seal the same, whereby the governors, toparchs, and generals of the provinces and legions may work the King's will more perfectly in this matter, and thus obliterate every creature from the earth that bears the accursed stamp of either Judah or Heber, as they are called, and *peace* shall certainly rule herein for all time."

Artaxerxes looked fixedly upon Aman. He was humane at least, though he murdered a tyrant to gain that tyrant's seat, though he was a heathen in heart and a despot in the people's minds.

A suave smile was hovering over Aman's lips; he fingered nervously the chainlet of massive gold coins upon his neck while he waited.

"If I command this, what shall I be called, therefore, and what good will accrue to me therefrom?" the King asked in a stern, resolute voice. "What will other nations think?"

"Seeing this, that the King of Phrygia sends, O my Lord, so stern a missive denouncing this race, and a humble prayer that thou wilt remove those of the Jews refuting there for fear of bloodshed, it requires but little

consideration on the one side and prompt action upon the other. Our terms hitherto have been and are now friendly with Phrygia ; but the Jews were sent thither by the command of Xerxes, whom now the dust covereth, and for fear of my lord the King's displeasure doth the King of that land now send to demand openly the withdrawal of these people, lest worse may be the result. Now, we are at peace with *all*, and it surely means the general extermination of the Hebrews for ever—before peace, and general good shall be upon us with the nations at large, for these things stir up the minds of the populace generally, and breeds strife in them."

Artaxerxes shivered. He paced the marble floor irresolutely for some minutes reflectively, and finally ascended the porphyry steps to his throne chair and sat down determinedly resolved.

"Open that door," he commanded loudly, "and call forth for the scribe Bygtha."

He was somewhat indignant, and beset with chagrin. He knew the tortures of flogging and burning had been the weapons upon these refractory ones in question, but without avail. All—all seemed havoc nevertheless, utter discord, and he was weary of complainings ; and from the very extremity of overwrought feelings, brought about by his Grand Chamberlain's condemnation of these poor hunted creatures, Artaxerxes wished them from off the face of his portion of the earth, in his heart, and from the site of the soil he governed, in very earnest.

Incense-bearers came forward with silver censors, waving a delicate perfume in the air, and the Court scribe entered.

"It shall be done," murmured Artaxerxes; "it is decreed. I will trouble me no more, but do the thing on this instant. Bring me hither polished papyrus, seal, and reeds — Thou, Bygtha, stand forth and decipher thereon according to my words, and, Aman, witness the same that I shall say. Yet, oh, why must blood and groans make up the richness of a kingdom's needs? These people I fain would seek and learn of even, in order to abide with them in peace, but thou tellest me that they curse the ground I tread, and militate against my life. Now, by my dignity and my throne, ay, by the sacred memory of my father, it is time I shall suffer it no longer. Now," he continued vehemently, "now write ye according to my words and my decree, as I shall so speak."

Aman fell prostrate before the throne. Unobserved, a sinister smile stole over his visage; he concealed it vigilantly, and kissed the King's footstool in utter humiliation, albeit the richness of his costume was far in excess of the King's his master, his tunic being of fine purple slit with pipings of gold, while heavy massive earrings weighed down his ears, and a tiara of great beauty was bound upon his coarse hair, but withal he was very humble in appearance.

Bygtha meanwhile approached the King, his scroll in readiness.

"Of all," vehemently cried the King again, the Syrians, Cappadocians, Lyssites, Lygurians, ay, those captives brought hither from the Lagoon, have I been more considerate, more full of love, towards these Hebrews than any. In return, they seek my life. They hate my rule and my jurisdiction, and seek to lay low my kingdom and my subjects. Away now with

soft folly, for my soul is hardened within me forthwith. Apprehensions are false, sentiment goeth for nought.

"Now, Aman, attend to us, and thou, Bygtha, write my words, for I will forthwith be myself." With an imperious gesture Artaxerxes silenced Aman, who seemed to desire speech.

He fell back from the royal presence, and was silent, and the King's voice rang out clear and determined: "Write as follows;" but while he thought momentarily, he first demanded of Aman, "These people give unto me some tribute. What loss, therefore, shall be mine because of their death?"

"My lord, I have stores and money," returned Aman. "Behold, very willingly will I deliver out of mine own estate forty thousand talents equal to their amount if such troubleth the King's mind; for I desire peace alone for the kingdom itself, and will willingly, as I said, bear the brunt of what will only be gain to my lord the great King and the State."

"Good, faithful servant!" exclaimed Artaxerxes enthusiastically. "This proveth love for our person and consideration, and for our wellbeing indeed. Take the money again, *I* have store enough. Take the men, the phalanx and host, and rid the land of this evil as *quietly* as you can. Let it be done swiftly and surely, all in one day, that no more may hereafter reach mine ears, and so will I give decree. Write now, scribe; write it down, as I here dictate unto thee."

Once more the polished roll was unfurled, and the King declared as follows:—

"I, Artaxerxes, the great King to the rulers of the hundred and twenty-seven provinces from India

to Ethiopia, send this writing and proclamation. Whereas, I have governed many nations, and obtained the dominion over all the habitable earth, according to my desire, and have not been obliged to do anything that is insolent or cruel to my subjects by such my power, but have showed myself mild and gentle, by taking care of their peace and good order, and have sought how they may enjoy those blessings for all time to come. And whereas I have been kindly informed by Aman——”

Here the Chamberlain fell forward, quivering, as though feeling very acutely the King's meditated word ; but Artaxerxes again bade him arise and stand aside, while he continued, in a firm voice—

“Whereas I have been kindly informed by Aman, who, on account of his prudence and justice, is the first in my esteem and dignity, and only second unto myself for his fidelity and constant goodwill to me, that there is an ill-natured nation intermixed with all mankind, that is averse to our laws, and not subject to Kings, and of a different conduct of life from others, that hateth just monarchy, and are of a disposition that is pernicious to our affairs. I give orders that these men, of whom Aman, our second father, hath informed us, be destroyed, with their wives and children, and that none of them be spared, and that none prefer pity to them before obedience to this decree. And this I will to be executed on the fourteenth day of the twelfth month of this present year, that so, when all who have enmity to us are destroyed, and this in one day, we may be allowed to lead the rest of our lives in peace hereafter.¹

¹ See Josephus, book xi. chap. vi.

"Let it suffice further," said the King to the assembly; "let the command go as it is written. In twenty-one days from this shall the work be done. Aman our counsellor hath worked well, and he will finish it.

"Let none of the refugees in Susa escape. I have said it, and by the horns of Bel I will be obeyed. Up into my ears, day by day, hath come some complainings from north and east, from Babylon the metropolis of the god, and now from Phrygia, an alien country, to our chagrin. Now let them be demolished from off the earth, and I shall be free at last."

Aman bent forward, took the King's onyx ring, and with the same sealed the death scroll in the presence of all.

"If we form pits of lighted pitch and brimstone," suggested Aman, "the death would be easier, and less trouble than sending out legions to slay the hordes; for they are so scattered."

"As you will, only trouble me no further. Rather let us make merry each day until the death day is passed. Bring me the wine-cup, and send out messages to thy sons and the governors around to come into the Palace for feast with thee."

"Now," returned Aman, "or shall the royal household first be making ready?"

"Perchance," said Artaxerxes heedlessly, "as it seemeth best; but go, and be ye all at the Palace tomorrow, as I ordain. Nor will I tolerate any *mention* of that day or the order wherein I have now given word so soon to annihilate this wretched race. It fretteth me enough, Aman, for it is not in me to murder wholesale. It is not in me!"

"If my lord the King cares for the chase to-day, let him so give the word that the time may pass in oblivion. Two lions have been seen in the streets of the metropolis, and are in dens on the plains somewhere around. Seek these for sport; it cheers the heart vastly. And my lord—is the King surely, and doeth right in all things, therefore should be merry and fear not."

"Wise Aman, so that *thou seest it well and good*, I will take heed, and rest on thy advice. Therefore, after our repast see to my guards, and bid the eunuchs make ready for the chase, then, and I will go hence and forget my troubles."

* * * * *

It wanted twenty-one days to the anticipated slaughter of the refractory race half-populating that kingdom, nevertheless each day it was given out that the King would hunt.

Runners, eunuchs in their state dress, and chariot-eers were in readiness every morning to go out to the plains, and in the woods around the suburbs to pass the days heedlessly until the massacre has passed over the land. Thus the time was spent.

Hosts came upon special invite to the Court at Susa from the cities, Artaxerxes sumptuously entertaining them there, while around the city spread the fatal death warrant amid greatest scorn to the hunted few within its dominion.

In consequence of all this, again did the Persian King omit to distinguish, as he had intended immediately, Mardocheus, the above events having chased the good intent from his mind, thus leaving this man still in the mercy of the arch enemy of his race.



CHAPTER V.

WAILING IN THE ASHES.

THE Babylonian was in earnest therefore, and his words spoke truth. For years in the new *régime* even had the Jewish people bent beneath the tyrant's yoke. Now the end was veritably at hand. The King's message and his cruel warrant for the general slaughter of men, women, and children alike on the fourteenth day of Adar had been publicly read in the market places through the streets and upon the acropolis steps each day. This in *every* city. Egress was now denied to any one attempting to quit the metropolis, and the guards of Absinöe's legion were summoned at the Seven Gates to prevent any escape from thence. The sight within the desolated portions of Susa the Palace, as well as in the little sanctuaries of the condemned people, was pitiable enough. Hundreds lay spread upon ashes full length, face buried in the dust, moaning piteously for Divine aid against the judgment decreed by the ireful monarch, so entirely given over to the evil scruples of his wicked and vindictive counsellor. Many refused food in order to die of sheer starvation, rather than to suffer the enemy's power to slay them at last. These were ignominiously buried in the dung-heaps outside the gates, being refused even decent burial, seeing they



took stand among the infidels and unruly. The King had further commanded that they should go "with violence" into the grave, both old and young, without mercy or pity, for their sins' sake.

The city was now filled with bitter groans, moreover, not alone this special place, but in every province under the rule of Artaxerxes wherein the command had been delivered, and where the ill-fated Jews rested.

Fasting was strictly enjoined by every breathing creature under condemnation, so that death should be easier; for Mardocheus, with the chief priests and elders of the Jewish nation, since the reading of the proclamation to the ears of all, had issued contemporary decrees of lamentation and mourning, by reason of the denunciation of all the King's people against them, seeing also that they primarily had injured none, and their woes seemed now doubly intensified because of the seeming cruelty of the King's mind in respect to them.

Mardocheus, the scribe and lawgiver, knew, nevertheless, the evil so paramount in the land. He was fully aware that it was *not* Artaxerxes who scourged his subjects with the iron rod of the despot. He, on the reverse, was a man of softer temperament than either of his kin had been, though withal a voluptuary. He possessed, nevertheless, mildness of nature, and general kindness of disposition, if under good advice.

In the hands of Aman, the wisest in craftiness of his race, Artaxerxes assumed absolute ease, leaving the reins of power upon the shoulders of the elder and more designing man.

None had dared to approach the throne with complaints against the great King's favourite. None ever breathed a word of calumny concerning the Chamberlain, lest by the morning light they might be strangled in their beds mysteriously. Power of stratagem and ingenious inhumanity was most rife in the era of the Darius's. For centuries the right of humanity itself was violated and mercilessly abused.

Litanies were therefore invoked in Susa at this mournful epoch for the utter destruction of the "malignant enemies" (as they termed the hated race), and the god "Bel" was looked upon to ratify the request unto them.

* * * * *

Since Mardocheus could not now approach the interior of the palace in his garb of sackcloth and ashes, he stationed himself without the gates. Far different in appearance was the dignified Jew to that of the courtly servitor who saved the King's life awhile ago. Though the pitiable significance of his position as one of the condemned brought him a measure of much scorn and contempt, he nevertheless stood erect in the presence of his persecutors, and looked them full in the eyes.

Three days had passed since Aman, the second ruler, had paraded the city in his bespangled litter, with attendant slaves bowing to earth, and besieged by cringing servitors. Now he revelled in his power of signifying the command of death to those he hated cordially. It gave him a loftiness almost indescribable; the inhabitants fell down before him in reverence and obeisance, for very fear of the punish-



ment of death this man seemed to deal so largely in. Aman was, in truth, greater in the people's superstitious eyes than the King himself, and *he knew it*.

Hadasseh, dwelling within the circumscribed area of the position correlative with captivity, albeit in a gilded cage of plenty and honour, knew not of the decree which in like measure would draw herself with her people into an untimely and ignominious grave. She, a Jewess of the race of Benjamin, beloved by the King of the land issuing the very decree, and who raised to wear the diadem, which was but as a sinecure and an honour, albeit bearing no power and no intrinsic vitality of significance unto her.

If Artaxerxes had reasoned or pondered silently one moment, he might have remembered now, that strange germs of intelligence respecting his Queen, and solely relating to her religious and social ground, had been brought to his ears, moments when she had in part confessed the same to him, and had stood up defiant, uplifting her faith before him fearlessly, and in so firm and patriotic a manner as to inspire his soul with wonder at the great intellectual capacity of her mind, and the lofty spirit of a defiant woman whose mission was not unworthy the Queen of the Great Persian Superb , thus filling his heart with a yet greater passion for her, and the desire uppermost to gain her love by those means he knew could only move her heart and influence her to look kindly upon him. Master as he was of her and the rest of the women, that mastery was but superficial over Hadasseh. She was unlike the rest; for as he was commander over the bodies of thousands and thousands, over this young

woman alone he felt absolutely less power than any. He was choice lest anything should harm her rather, and his great desire was to have her before him mostly, to seek her, despite love for him being as a metaphor in her life yet.

Artaxerxes had filled his Queen's Courts with everything beautiful. Like Cyrus his ancestor, he loved to form paradises of his own wherever he resided. So with Esther's palace was the same skill and artifice exercised. As previously asserted, she was accustomed to walk without the walls, down the long parallel paths and shady groves belonging to her domain, and she had absolute freedom therein.

She now rested upon an ebony couch in a chamber of her palace, overlooking the front of the chief square of Susa. She had come from the bath, for it was morning; and Tâis, the Egyptian woman, stood with fresh-plucked fruit from the gardens; but Esther, the Eastern star in the firmament of the King's life, was beset with a great loneliness. She refused even the delicate proffers of the slave. She was wearied with an all-pervading-presentiment that overpowered her. Every one seemed so quiet, sombre, and dejected; the palace savoured of an unknown continuous mysticism. She felt she desired some of the sweet solace of her own religion, a great balm for her heart's wounds, and some intelligence of her people—that intelligence that was ever almost absolutely denied her, because she had made herself an alien from them, and was amidst the worshippers of strange gods, alone, though a Queen.

Now and again the officiating eunuch, Acratheus by name, would pass and repass the alcove of her



chamber entrance, just within hearing, lest she desired speech with him, or to give some orders unto her servants. Two other females were plying fly-flaps at a respectful distance, as was their custom. But she was lonely, although her word was perfect law ; for Esther the Persian Queen was no longer the Jewish maiden Hadasseh, the child of Mardocheus's love, and the joy of the inmates of the scribe's dwelling ; she was chosen for higher ground and work, but nonetheless she felt not that work to be her portion in the present. Relaxation seemed so tardy, for day by day she would watch the glowing sun mantling over her palace roofs, while her full eyes scanned the distant city, and yet found no friendly sign to her inner spirit to commune with.

Night followed night, each bearing the same aspect to her, and the Fire-worshippers of Bel, invoking the presence of the God before the setting sun, her portion. Barefooted slaves sometimes crossed her chamber ever and anon, bearing perfumes, and waving censors of myrrh. Yet the Queen's life was as a flower embedded in a sepulchre, her condition wavering and uncertain as the breeze.

She would inwardly deplore the reason whereby she failed in loving the King, her lord and rightful master. His passionate pleadings oft would come again like an echo to her ears, and she would start up, confused and restless, wondering whether it was the response of reciprocity in her own heart to his throes of love for her or not. These feelings caused her to shiver, and remorse covered her erewhile, because he was not the lover of herself, inasmuch as

he permitted so unwisely her people's enemy, Aman, to rule in despotism over *them all*.

Abruptly at last she arose, drew her veil over her, and passed out on to the jasper balcony to look over the city. Once more, for comfort, she called Tâis.

"Tell me," she said anxiously, "what is that that walks yonder by the water's edge?—Observe."

Through the large cypress trees could be detected a dark strange figure. It was the spot where aforetime she had looked for her kinsman Mardocheus, and always knew by the colour of his robes which was he. But the form they looked out upon now was that of a creature clad in the coarsest of raiment, a colossal figure, as dignified as Mardocheus, yet condemned by some begrimed garb of misery and woe almost indescribable in its gloom and degradation.

Tâis crouched low, and peered through the balustrades. "Mistress," she answered, "if it be a man, he is a stranger to the land, and he knows not our usages. He looks unclean; ay, I can even see no face, but a mass of uncouth matter only."

"Call hither to me Acratheus," the Queen commanded, somewhat tremulously. "Let us learn of him."

She sent the eunuch to the entrance forthwith to inquire, saying, "If it be a wayfarer, give him, I pray, rest, and to eat, and see from whence he cometh, and bring to me word again soon, that I may know." And he went as commanded.

Tâis then brought her now some beautiful vestments, and anointed the dark, silky braids of her hair; and she went within, lest Artaxerxes perchance might walk to her palace as usual and find her absent. She trembled

violently, and tasted some dates preserved in honey, but she was very restless, and could find no relief in thought.

The clang of the tom-toms from the temple of Bel disturbed her sorely, and the chant of the priests arose in mournful cadence through the air. Her eyes now strayed dreamily through the long stone window-frames, falling upon the distant towers built upon the city walls for the purpose of the watch. The yellow tree-tops, and the chirping of the cicadas building their homes in the damp portions of her terrace gardens, gave fresh tone to her reflection. She fancied herself one moment treading the garden once again in Babylon under the guardianship of her loved people, and tending the sick in portioning out food and ointment with Zillah her friend. Yet Mardocheus had not stood at her palace gate for some three days, and she began to grow distressed on account of it.

As these thoughts pervaded her mind, when a little western wind blew the refrain of a Choric band passing along the square of the metropolis. She arose eagerly and looked without again. It was only a company of young men, under the order of purification, to be held in readiness for the King's use. Their voices had a sweet sound; it half soothed her. She saw just their moving bodies and the flutter of their red cloaks on the breeze. As she stood up, alone, for she had dismissed all, and Acratheus not being returned, she fell to again contemplating her own position. What can have chanced to Mardocheus? or why was she, a Queen, head of her household (her separate household, for the King had another house of women), why should she be in surveillance and denied communication with the few

of her race that she loved? They had been a mighty nation once, a long-suffering people; and through a marked presentiment, nurtured by Mardocheus, she felt she possessed some sort of Divine power to frustrate the prevailing power of slavery and evil overshadowing her race, and save them from further devastation and calamity. How? how could it be?

She then contemplated herself a moment in a long mirror of gold siding her chamber. She was tall and regal; her hair fell braided from her brow in a long veil of silky darkness over her soft purple tunic, woven with threads of gold. Upon her shoulders fell a mantle of pure white, clasped to her breasts with an emerald buckle of great value. She wore sandals of pearl inlaid with silver, and a profusion of jewels upon her arms and wrists, yet she felt withal helpless.

Suddenly, a murmur seemed to break in upon her reverie, a sound of heels beating upon the mosaic court without her chamber. She looked eagerly, and three figures came forward through the alcove.

It was the King with two of her attendant eunuchs.

"Go," he said peremptorily to them, but she observed one was Acratheus, whom she had sent to the gates on her special mission. She now bent her eyes pleadingly upon the man, but he said no word, cast his eyes to the floor behind Artaxerxes, and withdrew, touching his hand to his forehead in deferential humility to his master, and thus left the chamber.

Artaxerxes had in his hands a bunch of sweet myrtle blossoms; these he proffered to her, gazing upon her face.

He was very simply arrayed, without his superfluous vestments of state. A soft cap was upon his



head, with pearl rows, under which his mass of perfumed locks fell in profuse negligence. He looked more magnificent, though in simpler array than was customary, and a passionate light dwelt in his dark eyes as he looked mutely upon her, for he spoke not for the moment, but regarded her stedfastly.

"Mistress," he said, as though he in verity was supplicating a deity in place of a woman—"mistress!"

She said, "My lord, no word was sent me of thy coming hither. Behold, the slaves are gathering the fine canes yonder, but I will summon the musicians to give life to the dulness, if thou pleaseth."

"Why say 'dull,' O Queen?" he replied. "The chamber wherein the light of thy presence shines alone, is fairest to my eyes; the sound of thy voice sweet as the pomegranate juice, like fine honey to the taste of my thoughts. Why stand off from me in such obeisance? Am I still so dread a thing that thou fearest drawing very near unto me? Ay, be seated, and speak to me cheerfully. Be seated."

He flung himself upon her ivory couch, and motioned her beside him. A tremor seized her awhile, but she sat quietly a little way from him. He again contemplated her silently, as if proud of her, and resumed—

"Indeed, thou art more lovely than when thou didst sit at our marriage feast, for the veil then hid the beauty of thy face. No man shall see *thee*, though I issued the decree unto Vashti; but thou, my beloved, say when wilt thou look kindly upon me? Am I not low enough before thee now? and thou movest not, nor give unto me kindness in return."

He sank down upon the stones, and laid his head

upon her knees as aforetime, a light of extreme sadness within his eyes, and his hair falling over her lap. Instinctively she shrank with a sigh, and leaned back upon her seat. A distaste for him suddenly seized her.

"Thou shrinkest again," he said. "Am I therefore a brute that thou hast no manner of common attachment for? Even the old slaves in attendance upon thee at times receive verily a smile, and see some little gladness of heart in thine eyes. Also, yesterday, I sent Absinœe with some jewels for thee, and thou dost not wear them, I perceive; and the Babylonian tapestries I had worked are despised by thee. How is this? Ay, how is this?"

She saw he was disturbed greatly because of her coldness, and strove to appear less indifferent, but it was as though she dared not approach him, in part from fear and want of confidence. Yet while she could momentarily see in him the man, passionate, and yearning to prove that passion, anxious to gratify her every desire by amazing concessions and many acts of interest and love, she grew then tender in thought towards him. A moment she would picture him pleading sweet speeches in the arbour, or looking beseechingly into her eyes for the response he never gained. This began to torture her inwardly, for she would unconsciously whisper his name in her lonely moments. Was it Artaxerxes the great King she was learning to love—he who apportioned unto her people rulers of base and wicked inclinations, even scourgers? Then she awoke from her reverie.

"No," she shuddered. She saw him before her now, at her feet, that King, who married her to

please the State, from compulsion, and she knew him only as an awful, a severe potentate. whom she loved not. It was the Artaxerxes of her imaginary hours she had learned to desire and love, the man who dealt not severely to his slaves, but who governed with his own clear, unbiassed understanding—a man who spoke sweetly and softly, like unto *one* she saw and thought a governor of her garden once.

So deep were her thoughts at this moment, she scarce heeded that very one was bowed before her, her master and lord in truth—one who could isolate her amidst massive walls as a disobedient and refractory woman if he so pleased. She grew almost amazed as her reverie was broken swiftly by his rising, as though torn by confictions of humility, and a return of his natural pride and wrath.

"Thou makest unto me no answer," he said; "none have been like unto thee, and none so favoured. Thou knowest that I could determine otherwise for thee than this courtly palace and a Queen's crown. Girl, thou art befooled by instincts that are too lofty for women. Thou thinkest to govern a Darius! By the souls of my fathers, I could crush thee, and would that in like measure I could hate thee as thou hatest me!"

She shrank back, affrighted inwardly. His dark eyes were ablaze with ire, his fingers clutched the bandelets of his headgear in an uncommon frenzy.

"Come hither!" he continued, while the grasp of his lithe fingers upon her own caused her intense pain, so that she moaned. "Nay, come hither! Tell me, have I not sought thy every desire, allowed thee infinite freedom? Ah, be not afraid; I shall in nowise harm

thee, or crush thee, because thou art disobedient and unlike the other women. Vashti was so, but she was punished for example. Thou art in reverse, and put me to the *shame of supplication*—I, Artaxerxes, whom all the nations fear intensely. But no—ah! Thou mayst sit! Reflect, be somewhat mindful how thou slightest my word thus, lest I cast even thee from me, like the Median woman, save not for the State's pleasure again, but *mine own*, and remember this."

But she stood still, eyes downcast, immobile. "Israel" and Israel's good safety pervaded her mind instantly. What! had she forgotten Mardocheus's words to her on her departure from his roof, "*It is with thee to save thy people*"? She now felt hurt, cut to the inner heart, for was this the working of the mission? Was this the furtherance of the Divine inspiration which Mardocheus urged was to save Israel intact through her own diplomacy?

Artaxerxes, ardent as he was, still was a votive to good upon principle, that weight of principle which was as an heirloom of the illustrious race of the Darius's. She felt this man before her, great as he was, had a large heart, for he spoke to her despite her coldness with the law of kindness upon his tongue. If he removed her from chagrin, isolated her from her pristine position, she would be absolutely helpless; she would then possess no responsible power whatever; and the holy mission assigned unto her hands must from natural force of circumstances fall into a common servillitude of ignominy. "Bathsheba" of old, the powerful ruler of the heart of the wise and erring David, had not more unfavourable circumstances to deal with than she,

"Hadasseh, of the tribe of Benjamin," now before one of the Darius's. The insignia of royalty intrinsically was of little import to her. She had, she knew, a prescribed path to tread, and notwithstanding, was not kindly disposed to her high and new condition. She loved not this. How willingly would she have, like other maidens, worked and brought the fruit of her own hands to her kindred in affliction now! She would have risen even while it was yet night to have laboured for the bread of peace and contentment, and die thus. But, she is Queen of the realm, the heart of her husband trusts in her. She should rejoice that she might perchance reclaim her people to their own advantage, and foster the better views of humanity altogether in the land of the heathen.

Statecraft, she surmised, was omnipotent. The King was only a sinecure in the government. What, then, was Aman's object? Her dark brows contracted as she pondered all this. Oh! if the might of Destiny was balanced in her favour for her people's sake! He was now standing apart from her with a cloud upon his visage, and a bitter warfare within him. She knew it. She still stood, while a myriad of changeful thoughts floated across her mind as she eyed him. Moreover, she felt he was high and lofty, and she suddenly remembered he was mindful of her above the rest of the women of his affection. He was unused to supplication. Despotism knew its highest point over womenkind, and they were as nought before the face of their masters. All this caused her bitter pain and sorrow.

Moved by an unknown instinct, at last his eyes arose and contemplated her beseechingly, all perfectly indi-

cative of his great love. She had been dreaming of nought but the happiness of securing her people's safety and her kinsman's peace. Her soul now aloof, she sank upon her knees, overwhelmed momentarily, cast down through very bitter pain because of her state. She bowed her face forward upon her hands, and cried. Then immediately he sprang forward, forgetful of his wrath and passion. Only the man born in him was moved with compassion for her bitterness and sorrow, since he questioned within him how this should be, seeing she was mistress of his heart, and therefore of his realm?

"O beloved," he said, "have I not been eager to catch the rays of thy affection even, and *these* thou hast denied unto me? Why this trouble of spirit? Am I not all mighty? Ask of me the wings of the god, and I will obtain them. Rise! rise! and speak kindly unto me even now, and weep not."

She arose, but trembled; for it seemed an overshadowing of evil covered her, her long hair fell around her as a mantle; she was very beautiful, and exceedingly fair in his sight, as she stood.

"O King, my royal husband," she said softly, "thou unto whom nations bow, and the earth waxes small, give me word to speak *freely*, I pray."

He answered unhesitatingly, "Softly, ay, surely the Queen may speak."

"The Jews," she returned, tremulously, "scattered to the four winds of our Maker's universe. O my lord, the Jews! *Is it well with them?*"

He was confused, and answered nothing, but presently suggested in a piqued tone—

"Why art thou ever troubled over these, that thou clingest tenaciously to the woes of these people, who are nought to thee now, and separated by enfeebled diplomacy from every state existing. Trouble no more, I am aweary, and have seized upon the only effectual remedy to be *freed* of them."

"My lord," she said, looking agitated and alarmed, "thy words are ominous. Is it well, I repeat, with them? I beseech thee, tell me so! I have *no other* desire but to know this, and my heart faileth sorely."

This was a thrust fatal to the ardent nature of Artaxerxes, and which proved unbearable to him. That the one woman whose love and kindness he so steadfastly sought should openly tell him she had no desire upon earth but towards the people who were his professed enemies, galled him to the quick. He was fired. He felt omnipotent. The King, the master of a hundred and twenty women, out of which only *one*, the one he had sought and honoured most, stood up defiant out of her low position, and bade him go, for she desired not him, but others. With palpitating nostrils and set teeth, he answered her scornfully: "Woman, I will sue no more. No, no, it seemed to me I was blinded that thou didst resemble no other on earth but the goddess Ashtoreth. I yearned to seek thee withal. I was filled with unaccountable fear lest thou shouldst repulse me, for I saw in thee every attribute that was immaculate. The sun of the favour of Bel lighted upon thee, and thou wert inconceivably above others of thy sex, and thus thou commanded me. Even as in the garden once, ah! and then thou deemed

me less than the King, so now as the great King have I been as nought before thee. But, woman, woman that thou art, behold, *I am still* Artaxerxes, of the hundred and twenty-seven provinces, and will prove my power unto *even thee*. I sue no more. I am gone, and leave thy roof until perchance *thou* shalt seek me, and find—find it more suitable to bend unto the King than I to thee in the time to come.”

His arms fell. He was moved, and his voice again quivered most painfully: “Nevertheless, from my gardens shall I, Esther, stand and watch thee. Remorse will change thy mind. Yea, though I wait until the earth shake again, and devastation covereth us, still, thou art mine. Take heed lest thou shalt nonetheless command me in like measure, and are likened unto the rest of the women of thy sex by me.”

As he moved to depart, a sudden conviction overwhelmed her absolutely. She held her arms forward instinctively. She suddenly felt she loved him, if but for his goodness and valour ever expressed so favourably towards her. A swift coursing of her blood threw a mantle of ruddiness over her neck and brows. Now she desired him ardently. She stepped forward, seized with a trembling inconceivable, for she did not wish his absence. “O King, stay!” she said, to move him to pity; “stay with me, I beseech!”

He answered firmly: “No; I go hence. I have received thee hitherto well. *I* have now been a remorseful, humble suppliant, but *no longer*. I leave thee, since thou hast no desire but unto a folk that think of *thee* as nothing, and would speak ill of thee and of *me*. Therefore, bethink thyself, and learn



wisdom, ere thou play rife with the heart of a man and a King."

He was gone, swiftly his sandals resounded upon the mosaics of the palace floor. She even gasped his name, for suddenly she *missed him*. She was filled now with a fearful sensation between new love and strange desires, and the inner germ of her mission for Israel's sake standing predominant over all.

He had departed in wrath. She felt she had erred, and that he would visit her no more—no more. Monarchs have been known to do rash and mournful things; women have ere this worked miracles; but she, God of Israel, what was to be the close! Should she fail—then woeful day!

Long she was buried face downward upon the stones, sobbing, prostrate, but without avail.

It was Acratheus who aroused her, saying at last mournfully in her ears: "The Hebrews are condemned, O Queen, and are to die upon the day of Disa, the fourteenth of Adah—all to die as *one* mighty man. Mardocheus the scribe, a Jew of the Court, it was who walked without in mourning of sackcloth and ashes, and this which I bring is his message."

She looked vaguely, as though one perplexed; then reaching forth her hand, she grasped the piece of dried skin, unrolled it, and read, silently, the words written thereon:—

"Daughter of Israel, bewail! Put upon your body no vain apparel; for it hath been now determined by the King himself, through the mouth of the crafty and vile Aman, that we must all suffer death on the fourteenth day of this present month, unto which fulfilment it wanteth but the space of thirteen days

to mourn ! Ay, mourn ! for we are forsaken and under the destroyer's wrath, unless our God shall arise with His might to cast over this enemy, and with them shall treacherous Aman perish. We die ! Our whole house wails. Ay, Zillah sendeth greetings of woe ! Thirteen days are only left for the mission—thirteen more days of mourning, and the fourteenth day of tribulation, then we die, or we are uplifted through the will of our God. Put on with us sackcloth, and send out unto our people into the city a messenger swiftly for a suit of proper raiment for thee ; and remember we are as dust for smallness now. Upon the earth lie for three days ; and our blessing rest with thee, nevertheless. And unto Queen Esther doth our people raise not only a blessing, but the voice of supplication in the last of our days, to work Jehovah's cause.—THY KINSMAN, MARDOCHEUS THE JEW."

The young Queen, observing in the silence that the eunuch still waited, now motioned him away. She wished for solitude to pray and to think, as women think in dire emergencies—alone. She looked again wearily, with heavy eyes, to the gilded gates in the distance. Shading her brow, she saw the figure was still there, naught but a mass of dark drapery.

"O Mardocheus !" she cried within her, lest for fear the slaves guarding her threshold might detect her grief, "truly my soul is broken like unto thine ; for if it escapeth the King's heart, it is nevertheless present with mine, that I must also die and be buried with thee, my kinsman and my people together. Täis, Täis, Saltha, Acté, come forth, ay, I desire ye. Solace me, if ye have hearts that do mingle in common with the sorrows of a woman. Täis, call hither one of the eunuchs. I must send him forth into the metropolis on the instant. And thou, Saltha, take my fine linen and this fillet that binds my hair, also this purple

cloak—I have no need of it awhile—and cover my head with dust and ashes, like unto mine own nation from which I was taken, and whither I would return, to fill these garments of pomp and grandeur *no more*. Now these are naught to me. I loathe them, as I loathe these walls which separate me from the tears of my people ; for a heavy cloud is upon me, wherein, when death compasseth me, I shall but rejoice, because it then will be removed for ever—ay, for ever.”

She wept fully while they unrobed her ; then rising again, she commanded the slaves to carry out from her sight the vessels, cups of gold and silver, with the vases of fruits inlaid with precious stones ; “for,” said she, “these things embitter me only, for I am no more than those under condemnation and the full penalty, and will suffer with them in like measure, by my soul.”

They spoke not in return. They saw she was changed ; and when they bowed their faces to do her customary homage, she grew most distressed, and bade them in nowise remind her, for the space of three days, that she was their mistress, or called their Queen, since she was but a mere woman. Finally, she besought them to call her “*Hadasseh*,” and thus she reminded them that she was a creature of the Hebrews, desiring no more but what was subject to her race and their present ignominies.

She clothed herself coarsely in two sheets of hemp cloth, woven, buried her face in the earth, and besought God with every breath to lay means at her hands to save Israel. For she remembered also that how in wrath and ignorance of all this she had *sent the King from her*.



CHAPTER VI.

BEHOLD THE QUEEN !

“And upon the one she leaned, as carrying herself daintily ; and the other followed, bearing up her train.”—ESTHER xv. 3, 4 (*Apocrypha*).

IT was during this short space that Artaxerxes, with some chagrin and remorse upon the spending out of his impetuous passion, grew fearful lest his Queen might consider the words he uttered wrathfully were intentional, for he was now vexed at heart because of them. Her Palace has grown gloomy in the few days passed by. The slaves came not so diligently on their customary missions, and a quietude was prominent about all the gardens and the household.

“So she repenteth,” he said to himself, “and I was truly severe in my tongue. It is to my bitterness that ’twas so. I meant nought when I was angered, for this woman is more to me than all the rest. Her voice, her words govern me, and I am even less than a King in her presence, and it must be so.”

Aman attended him as usual, and he questioned him in the early morning at the rising of the Court of the Queen’s house.

“The Queen is not to be seen,” returned Aman. “The Janizaries of her chambers have in nowise observed her, neither has she passed without for these

three days. The canes are now laden with juices, and the palms overflow with sap, but no creatures have yet been seen at their customary duties to gather them."

"How is this?" asked Artaxerxes concernedly.

"The Queen saith no man is to disturb the quiet. But perchance it is merely a woman's fretting," continued he, "for the Jews that are to perish."

"Ah," mused Artaxerxes, "and women do these things. How can I avert it?"

"But, my lord, the King hath decreed," returned Aman, quickly.

"Philosophise not to me of what thou thyself hast strenuously worked to gain. Yea, despite, O Aman, thou art wise and very discreet, and I value thee; trouble me not, I say, with the name of these people more, and let me feel my justice was meet for my peculiar people's good. Now I would seek peace—I would gain a simple happiness, and it seemeth far yet from me."

"O King of Ethiopia and the tributary states, thou art mighty and wise, and can command hosts, why not?" said Aman.

"Have peace, I say. Thou wouldst say again, '*Women.*' Thou art right in part perchance, but not wise in knowing the rightful heritage of an insatiate heart. I weary of *your* women; I tire. There is an end to it, for I have sought intellect, reasoning, and mental power instead, and know but *one* in whom it resteth—yet but one, and that hath failed."

"And that is the Queen?" answered Aman suavely, fully persuaded in mind. "Ay, well! Thou knowest it. She is thy wife, my lord; nevertheless, not tried or

proven *even faithful*. When Aman, son of Ammedatha the Agagite, speaks, it is not without jurisprudence. My lord, test me! Have I proved yet faithless? O be ye still our King, and live."

"Wise Aman, yea. Thou hast ruled us wisely with love and faithfulness, I know, but no more. I must forget the power of women, and get me to justice. Nonetheless, I am but a man, and a creature of flesh. Call ye my chamberlains hither, and the eunuchs to robe me for the audience with the princes from Tyre. Nevertheless, be next me in person, wisest of my counsellors, that these to-day may see whom the King loveth and respects with greatest honour."

Aman kissed his robe; and Artaxerxes looked once more towards the white palace of his Queen again before he passed into his chamber to dress. It stood in its white splendour, almost deserted, as though pressed by the dark shadow of death. The change was marked also by the extreme quietude, which gave the monarch the greatest consternation, inasmuch as from east to west of the great hemisphere the white palaces of Artaxerxes in beauty and elegance shone out without party paragons.

Now all seemed barren of the usual sweet sounds. No visible sign of the Queen's women, who aforetime took their tasks in the open, or played upon stringed instruments at the fountains or cisterns of perfumes,—all these were absent. His brow again darkened, and he grew melancholy. He turned, and again addressed Aman to dispel his nervousness.

"Has the gold mines of Thessaly been redundant of late, or all the ivories of India been brought in

hither — the jasper for pillars, and the bryre for stepping-stone—for nothing, that they are shut out from the light of the master? Who desired these artful devisors to build such a house, that should lie in impenetrable obscurity like unto that? Answer, and see yonder gloom, despite all these things.”

“None is absent, my lord. By my beard, none. It is all my lord the King’s! Yet listen, when the Cyclops erected the Pyramids, behold what then presided over the parts of nature, or the mind, that it held any supreme power? Were such strong men, rulers and kings, bethink you as now, to feel the slights of women? Surely, no, my lord; for those were rulers, and the intellect of men grew strong, and with it the knowledge that the earth should be governed by them.”

“What then? Thou speakest riddles, Aman.”

“Then, O King, vast hordes of calumniators arose, armies of insurrectionists. The earth trembled beneath their weight at last, and a mighty battle waged more profound than any other thing in creation.” He stopped; his voice arose to a sonorous pitch, as though he held Divine gifts of speech whereby he could propound things passed, and foretell the shadow of the future.

“Proceed!” the King said irritably. “What then?”

“Then good, my lord; an enormous body darkened the horizon on this occasion. It covered the plain, already filled with dead and dying. The myriads of nude figures crouched in appalling terror now, as though fear of the earth collapsing into the uncertain space held them in thrall. Whereupon, a certain man

among them arose, and, in a voice of thunder, given him by the god in the cloud of the hemisphere, commanded them to cease, and directed those who would be saved from perishing to follow the sound of his voice. This man was a god, in truth, O King, and the inspired ones fled from the scene, and besought him to lead them out of the extreme darkness! They passed then into a wilderness, where remains of a once plenteous garden of fruit had been.¹ They here built them fresh altars, and reared at last, by much labour, a city by itself—alone. They also became a dominion, ruling generations, and unto this day they remain."

"And the city's name?" asked Artaxerxes, after a pause, interested momentarily.

"Persia, my lord. Thine own dominion!"

"Ah! I know thy wisdom, O Aman. Thou art well learned; but what of him whom this nation first followed? Who was he—that mighty one?"

"The father of great and mighty Bel, O King, who doeth so much for us, and whom all the people give praise and sacrifice unto. It was he alone, the originator of the vanquished hordes of these Cyclops left behind upon the darkened plain."

Aman said nothing more. His ruse had had the one effect he desired it to have upon the mind of his master, and had erased the emotional despondency from his heart probably for awhile, as he wished. He forgot the chagrin he had experienced. Now he cast his purple over his shoulder, motioned his eunuchs to follow him, and went within his robing

¹ Eden.

chamber to tire for the reception of the contemporary princes, who had lately arrived.

Absinöe, the son of Aman, drew near to his father when the King left. He bore tidings of some signal import, for he was agitated and heated.

"Why come hither so hastily?" inquired Aman curtly; "what news bring you?"

"Of Isis," returned Absinöe excitedly, "she is missing. Her priests were found nigh the chamber of the goddess, bleeding and gashed with knives, this sunrise."

Aman cursed Ashtoreth thereupon. "Where are the women who tended her?" he asked peremptorily.

"Only two remain; *they are speechless.*"

"Torture them into words then; burn them to the knees. Firstly make them speak what they know."

"Fear not," fiercely returned Absinöe; "for I go already with a legion to Babylon, behold, for thither I heard she had gone. *Fled! fled!*"

"Wherefore there, alone and unattended?"

"Nay, in company with Zerobabel the toparch."

"Curse her, O Bel, and let her body be beaten into jelly, that the dogs may lick it from the stones of that city. Go hence, Absinöe; carry with thee a warrant for her punishment; for shall the daughter of Aman disgrace the house, the name, or her own deified estate? Take a strong phalanx also, for let it be known that Aman now ruleth in the place of the great King this day and hereafter," and he dug his dyed finger nails into his palms, and gasped with rage, while his forehead, daubed with minium, stood out conspicuously over his sunken eyes. "I can wait no longer here with thee," he said, "but *she* shall suffer. She shall

burn with an unslaking thirst, and her eyes shall join those who have been hitherto sacrificed to the god, and whose orbs adorn his throat. Thus shall *even the one* daughter of Aman perish. Go, *I* command it! But yet—stay—one word. Where is the man Mardocheus the Jew?"

"He still revileth thee at the King's Gate," answered Absinœ. "He even stands in his filth and coarse covering among the high, and yet none say, '*Get thee gone.*'"

"Who am I, that this wretch dare stand in the presence of the mighty in the land, seeing he is to die the death of the malefactor? Who am I that he shall defy me? Pass on, Absinœ, I will give the command. He *shall go hence* from my sight."

He was choking with passion, veins stood out upon his face and neck, and upon his jewelled arms. He strode on to the King's Court, while the slaves and the assembled populace bowed before him in servillitude.

Mardocheus was alone, dejected, a calm serenity still at the sight of his enemy spreading over his face. Immovable he stood, while the rest wondered. Speechless he was, while others said—

"Hail, Aman, beloved of the great King, hail."

"Cast that vile thing forth from us," shouted the Grand Chamberlain. "Who dares defy us thus, and defile our palace with his accursed presence? Who dares to admit this miserable object in his filth, the leader of those whom the great King hateth, and hath doomed to destruction? Go hence to the dunghills, man, and call upon thy mighty One to save thee now. Come not here in our sight, dog and reptile. I say to ye slaves, cast forth this man immediately."

"He is a *servitor*, my lord," humbly ventured a Persian captain of the horse, "and has done good work hitherto."

"Am I a fool or a ruler, and is my word to be defied? His presence is *against me*, I say; ay, against the King, the great Artaxerxes. How darest thou defy me also? Guards, put also now this querulous servant into chains."

Mardocheus responded in a few words. He cast his eyes upon his Persian defender.

"Fear not, O young man," he said; "I do go out, but *I shall return*, and *thou* also. Remember, Aman and I are the dragons, for we are at fight."

His large, erect frame stood out in striking contrast to that of Aman's. The latter foamed at the mouth with rage, and gripped his bosom in the desire to fly upon the Jew, and vent his passion in an ignoble combat. But his ambitious mind weighed in the balance, and his device withheld him from so unseemly an act.

Before hands laid hold of him, the Jew had turned his back and passed with dignified leisure from the Court out into the square of the metropolis. It was a bitter affliction thus to be oppressed, to be in woe, and trodden under the feet of the infidel likewise. Nevertheless, Mardocheus waited alone in the solitude without.

Notwithstanding Aman's attendance at the throne being imminent, he passed through the courts in his turmoil, and entered his own palace to speak to Zeresh his wife, and remained there until the chief eunuch from the King's audience chamber called him forth by the command of the King. As he left his wife, he took a draught of syrup of strong wines, saying,

"By this drink let it be known that the thing shall fail not. Before the gates of Susa shall the gibbet of fifty cubits high be set this night. Who shall scorn at Aman again without fear? O thou most wise woman, thy words comfort me; they are as honey to my taste this moment. Behold, I am Aman the wise and great again, and my diplomacy *will fail me not.*"

* * * * *

That morning the Queen of Artaxerxes also was astir early. The three days of mourning had elapsed since that spasm of unusual grief had made rife with her peace and pervaded her spirits.

Now she prepared herself for the bath. There was a gentle yet proud deference about her as she ordered the slaves and her tiring women to bring out her grand royal robes.

She said to the bewildered Tais, "My square of purple with the gold stars, and all my queenly adornments." Then the maid commenced to robe her, for she said, "I go to the great King's throne; and seeing I am his wife, adorn me as befitteth a Queen, and the wife of so great a monarch, in the goodly purple."

Over a tunic of gold, finely woven in silk, she put a second robe, which fastened to the ankles, and was of a brilliant green, and soft as air, starred with eyes from the peacock's plumage. A wide girdle jewelled with emeralds and costly pearls caught this in over the hips. Then Tais secured to this a train of brilliant Court purple edged with beads of turquoise and interspersed with the royal rosettes, such as worn only by the King himself on state occasions, these composed of great pearls of immense value, both black and white. This

being completed, a thin gauze of white silk, fringed, was laid over her hair and face, the former having undergone the usual process of perfuming and anointing with precious oils and balms. Tâis then placed little sandals of white mother-of-pearl, threaded with silver, upon her bare feet, and jewels and wristlets of pure gold upon her arms, so that she appeared a marvel of dazzling brilliancy for splendour of apparel and jewels. She stood a moment glancing toward the Eastern firmament, and prayed inwardly, then commanded Tâis and Saltha to make ready to accompany her. They clothed themselves in yellow and white, symbolical of silver and gold, one bearing her crown, another her sceptre, and with trembling heart followed her in the rear.

It was known throughout the land that no creature—less, indeed, a woman—dared approach the royal throne unbidden. Yet Hadasseh, a woman of the Hebrews, a scion of stricken Israel, came forth on the brink of eternity to die at the very footstool (her place) of the tyrant, if so it must be, nevertheless, so to suffer. She went forth, a woman aforetime very patient, gentle, and trembling, now a woman with determination strong as the cords of death over a lifeless body. Her lips were sealed until she reached the throne, that throne where only once previously she had stood before, a fragile and sensitive girl. As a Queen thither she goes now to plead unto the monarch of the land; now in royal dignity of status to baffle by diplomacy, if not by love, the wicked devices of her people's enemies and her foes.

Thus the little band came on to the King's Gate.

The guards, affrighted at the sight of a woman's audacity, albeit awed by her queenly aspect and royal grandeur, bent low, and immediately struck their javelins to earth, while she passed their midst and walked in her stately grace forward.

A hundred bodyguards kept the entrance to the sacred audience chamber secure. These were before her astonished to speechlessness; they stood wondering and amazed. The Royal Throne was observable through the open alcoves, the high golden dais, the innumerable attendants, and the royal Tyrian princes around the seat of the King himself. Who cometh, therefore, hither at such a moment? What small but awe-inspiring train demands such homage and headway to the presence of the great King at this imminent epoch of the state?

Acratheus the eunuch then cried, waving his wand of office thrice, "Esther the Queen! Make way. Behold the Queen! The Queen!"

A hushed murmur flew thereupon to every lip, a strange tremor seized the monarch himself. Why, he credited not. He was astounded. All men gazed at the entrance. The Magi, the royal princes, scanned the group without the chamber, yet visible through the opening, with incredulous wonder at their very daring.

"Behold," cried Aman, alarmed, springing forward and addressing the Throne, "ye guards, *this* is some treasonable onslaught to do harm to the mighty King. Do your worst if they approach! 'Tis conspiracy, ay, treason."

Loud murmurs meanwhile filled the Court outside.

These grew full of strange meanings. Who can this be thus approaching? Never had such indiscretion of conduct, seeing it only meant death, occurred in all the reign of Artaxerxes or his forefathers before him.

Yet, amid soft music, three figures and attendants cleared the entrance. Every one present sprang upon their feet and watched. Artaxerxes looked magnificent. His jewelled tiara of gold upon his dark locks gave his face a majesty of its own—omnipotent. His right hand carried a shining sceptre of like metal, beautifully carved and resplendent. His sandals were of pure gold, also inlaid with precious stones, and upon his brilliant robes were painted lilies in exquisite similitude to the flowers themselves. All about shone kingly splendour. The throne, the floor, ceilings, and these surroundings were to the woman's heart of the approaching suppliant an awful and portentous reality.

"*She*" advanced slowly, eyes ahead falling upon the monarch's face alone. Tâis had put upon her the golden crown of her high state, and her own sceptre of golden lilies was in her hand, also like unto a queen. So weighty was the fabric of her jewelled train, that Saltha bore it from behind at a considerable distance. It was as though a trembling or a sudden indisposition at last seized her, for she leant tremblingly upon Tâis with her right hand; and as they came before the guards of the throne, they stayed for a little space, while every man's eye was bent upon them.

The polished axes of the guard were uplifted. She knew it—knew it well! Thoughts of death encompassed her forthwith, for Aman had *ordered so*. Who shall save her? If she speak, they will strike her

down. Meanwhile she saw him, her lord and husband, who awhile ago had supplicated unto her in person. Ah! now in his awful majesty of state, she knew him as the only saviour of her life and her people's.

And yet he spoke not—but, like unto the rest, gazed in awestruck amazement upon her and her small band, as she stood by the entrance, waiting.

The guards apportioned to keep the gateway of this the King's "High Court" were constrained from sheer admiration and amazement to do homage to the Queen. Notwithstanding, seeing that Artaxerxes had not demanded her presence, nor signified any desire for the appearance of the lesser caste to enter upon the sacred precincts of his audience court, this strange step, and the astonishing presumption of a youthful creature, though she be the King's wife, was beyond the comprehension of the whole mass assembled therein.

She had come forth, however, adorned for conquest. She had mourned bitterly as she sent her word to Mardocheus. Her maidens, too, had joined in her woe for all the time. Now she entered a new plan of campaign—as *a conqueror*. She knew the King loved her, and therefore understood the most adroit manner in which to lead him into her path.

"If I perish," she had said, "*I do perish* ; but not until my struggle for life and our general liberty be accomplished."

Mardocheus, worn and jaded, that scion of the house of Benjamin, had been peremptorily hustled out from the court of the servitors awhile ago. He was looked upon merely as scum, derided by the wily

Amalekite, and counted as nought upon the earth by his followers. Now all this came before Esther the Persian Queen. But seeing she had the knowledge of what had occurred, and that the eunuchs had told her of the decree posted off unto the provinces by the scribes of the Court, also Aman's deliverance of this decree unto his sons in command, and that the lieutenants of the army were all apportioned their tasks upon one certain day to destroy the whole of her race. Moreover, how these were signed and sealed by the King's ring; and that Aman had given from his own treasury the amount of tribute payable unto Artaxerxes from the Jews, she fully understood the purport and meaning of *all*, and was not perplexed in mind.

The seven Tyrian princes stood nigh the throne steps. These also bent their looks upon her. A hundred toparchs and minor princes of Persia were ranged in respectful distances on either side of Artaxerxes. Behind these also were the seven princes composing the Magi, and their several attendants. Added to these were also envoys from the states of Media, eunuchs of the King's household, captains, lieutenants, and scribes of different nations—a vast array, and the throne in the midst.

All were bent in full contemplation of this woman.

A multitude also occupied the outer court, such as servitors, elders, priests, and the like,—who were likewise eager, and straining their sight to look upon the three strange comers passing through the centre.

The Queen stood between the doorway of this magnificent yet mystic place at last, unable to pro-

ceed too quickly, knowing death was dared to the teeth by so doing, yet willing so to suffer if it must be her portion. A few murmured vaguely, "The new Queen! *A woman here!*" And the whole mass of inquiring eyes turned again to where she stood with increasing wonder because of her audacity!

A chilliness struck into her soul a moment; and her lips moved, "O God, Thou knowest I have no desire for mine own life, but for my people's." She leaned daintily upon her maid and prayed innately the while, her face filled with holy zeal and inspiration, ruddy and beautiful in the extreme.

Aman the Amalekite was near the King's right, his brows contracted. "How dare this woman desecrate the sacred canons of the land and come into the presence of the King unasked? And at such an epoch!" he questioned, for he knew the nature of his master nevertheless. Much as he longed the guards might cleave her to earth as she advanced, he knew that was impossible, for Artaxerxes was not only a monarch, but a man. And he (Aman) dared not malign her now.

A sudden impulse seized her. She came on with a visible trembling within close sight of the King.

Then she hastened forward, and faced him.

Here she stood, as once before she had so done, but now with a look of strange eager yearning in her eyes which before she had never possessed. Heavily she pressed upon Tâis, while silence reigned, and astonishment was supreme.

A dozen captains, ready to obey the decree of the King, should he so wish to exterminate these intruders,

stood around the jasper pillars, supporting the golden chair, awaiting his word, and she was seized with an uncontrollable fear, which penetrated her heart sorely. If they cut her down, though but a feeble woman, she would not die before her supplication had reached the King's ear. He was her husband, and once again she espied through the mystic halo of imagination the stranger of the garden, and that phantom pervading her dreams.

Fear for the surroundings now *alone* seemed to arise as a gigantic foe, before her—not fear of the King *her husband*. Several making bold, and instinctively assured, exclaimed still again wonderingly, “Behold, indeed, it is the Queen!” that all this murmuring, the bending of eyes upon her, shook her fortitude more; and finally gasping inarticulate words, she fell forward from her maiden's clasp prone upon her face before the throne and the whole glorious assembly.

Artaxerxes experienced a terrible fear.—His serene intrepidity vanished immediately, the surroundings were nought to him, nor the multitude of courtiers and princes. He saw but this creature before him. It was as though daylight had struck into his sleeping soul, at last. This glorious woman, his Queen, had hither come on some *wonderful errand* he knew well enough, and he would, therefore, hear her voice. With a hasty bound, sceptre extended, and in a voice of pity, he sprang down the polished stairs leading to his throne, while the guards instantly stood aside lowering their weapons. He lifted her tenderly, smoothing aside her golden sheeny veil to look at her face, and spoke, beseechingly—

"What ails thee, my Queen? Speak! Be cheerful, and look up. Ay, be not afraid, I am near thee, and nothing can harm thy life. Though the fires of a hundred furnaces are nigh, yet they shall never consume thee. Speak, Esther, I will not affright thee even by the word of King or Husband. See,—I am thy brother, if so it pleaseth thee best. Look, and fear nothing, for I will grant unto thee *anything*, even to the half of my kingdom; and if so it pleases thee, I am as *thy brother*."

With half-closed eyes, she strove to stand, her beautiful vestments giving a golden glory to the fairness of her face and shape. They gently led her up the polished stairs, where at last she rested in the seat of the Great King. There was now a great whispering among the whole of the Court functionaries. Every face was fastened upon the King, for he was greatly changed as in a moment. A curious nervousness pervaded him even when her voice, low and clear in sweet cadence, arose in the audience chamber. He strove again to comfort her.

"My lord, my heart trembled because of thy great majesty," she said. "It seemed I saw thee as an angel of *my* God, and until now I knew it not. How great and wonderful thou art, and this terrible place, ay, this hall of wonders!" So painfully she shook again, that he was tormented with the only natural anxiety he had ever known—to relieve her.

Her head drooped forward upon his shoulder. He then struck his breast heavily, abhorring the reason whereby she had been led hither in such grief, despite the joy he felt at beholding her presence alone and of her own desire. As she recovered again, he pressed

her to tell her request, but she was crushed by the surroundings and by the austere and wondering scrutiny of the mass assembled around her. "My lord," she essayed at last, "I desire that thou, in company with Aman, shall come to my table this night. Hither I came truly to make known my woe ; but now, I pray thee, that I prepare a banquet, a little feast, at my palace this night, and behold I will propound when I am in better heart than—my desire unto thee."

He stooped before the assembly and kissed the hem of her veil : " My joy in thy presence is all I can desire. Ah ! O Queen, more will I grant you than this. Ask of me more and receive. Nevertheless, cheer thy heart, and be no more fearful, for I will in nowise break my oath, as thou art my wife and my Queen, so I swear. I am disposed rather to accuse myself for mine own severity ; but as my word maketh legions to tremble, so in like measure doth the thought of thy good and thy safety alone cause me to tremble and desire to serve thee better.

" Hearken, Aman, our good and valued counsellor, our Queen doth invite thee to join with me to eat at her table to-night. Fail not, but accept that honour, which no other man hath been allowed to accept in all the annals of the laws of the Medes and Persians."

And with these words he arose, dispersed the congregation suddenly, and each went unto their several palaces.

Hadasseh, panting and distraught, buried her head in the costly mantle falling over the gilded dais. It was a heart-whole fervent desire for all her people that bade her cry, " Mercy, O King ! *Mercy !* "

But he answered, "Not *mercy*, O Esther, at my poor hands, but tell me the desire wherein I can please thee alone, and I will grant it. Tell me, therefore, now! now! What is thy request?"

And she replied, "O King, hath my God indeed made thee an angel to me, that I must perforce worship thee at last, and no more seek to fly from thy face. Nay! nay! I am changed, but I desire a *great gift* the which I will hereafter ask—a mighty concession, but I am too weak now."

"Beloved, look at me no more then as a ruler, but as a servant, willing to follow thy behests, and judge me accordingly. It *shall be* granted thee."

And she said in reply, "Come hither to-night, then, with Aman, thy second ruler and thy counsellor, to my palace."

And, laying her forehead upon his hands, she remained a moment in supplication, then arose, and taking her maids in her train, she softly passed from the courts with her other attendants, and these walked forth through the outer courts into her own palace; while she left him pondering with an uncertain joy, commingled with surprise, at her attitude towards him, but nonetheless resolved to hear all her pleas, and gain her absolute confidence thereby.



CHAPTER VII.

THE FORGOTTEN REWARD.

THE elder son of Aman had departed from the port of Susa in three ships down the river for Babylon, carrying thither a strong horde of hardy men, principally from the mountains, and three hundred talents of silver, to mete out as rewards to those successfully conquering the army of Zerobabel, and for the capture of Isis and the head of the toparch himself. A confused clamour pervaded the city ; for Absinöe, hankering for some new exploit, and greatly desiring the seat of Zerobabel for himself, went forth with a sanguinary object in view, meeting his own sordid ends rather than to the saving of Isis his sister or her honour. He was aware of the intrigues organised by Aman his father, also of his influence over the King and his power at Court. He had at sunrise called together the chiefs of the forces, and expounded to them the orders of the government, while he also excited their hostile susceptibilities against neighbouring tribes and their rulers. He charmed them with vain theories and vainer rewards, and told them of his mission thither. When the different hordes, including the Persian army, heard of the abduction of Isis, a newly consecrated priestess, and the daughter of the second ruler of the

kingdom, they became almost furious. Some made frantic gesticulations from the desire to punish both, after the common fashion of the land. And as many strong men as were selected to accompany Absinöe out to Babylon, the state of Zerobabel, were burnt upon the thighs with an iron cross, in signification of their office and their peculiar mission. Absinöe, wearing a thick suit of hippopotamus hide and a cuirass of gold consecrated by the sign of the god Bel, stood upon the prow of his ship erect. His face was clouded by a sinister expression, made hideous by the Amalekite signs of paint, and having his beard curled with Assyrian accuracy to denote his rank. His air, too, was pompous, impressive, while the hundreds of every nationality and tribe applauded him loudly ere he left the quay. Before this multitude, within sight of the palaces and the watch towers of Susa, Absinöe made orations to his armies; and setting his five younger brothers over the certain extra legions, gave word for the unloosing of the cable, turning his face toward the great city where Zerobabel held his minor possession and was a governor.

Meanwhile, the despised and unhallowed nation, that unhappy race inhumanly condemned without the common rights of a just hearing, now filled every part of the metropolis at this terrible season. The air of the city seemed inundated with their cries of mourning. They were even now maltreated by the populace at large, who displayed an immoderate love for cruelty ever, inasmuch as it was not consistent that the herd should exhibit any signs of righteous jurisdiction. And therefore, since for these condemned ones there was no

hope of reprieve, and it was considered ignoble to suffer any defamers of the god to escape, many were ignominiously put to death with the most spiteful voracity. Venerable priests were mutilated, even spat upon, by the friends and servitors of Aman, since he issued no decree otherwise; therefore, through the common sentence of death, many adjudged it an act of piety and mercy to kill any that chance so brought to pass. The Queen's command that "they should fast strictly and bear their hardships with due supplication on her behalf, with their own woes, to the Most High," had been received with gladness and joy of heart, while the house of Mardocheus served as an hospital to numbers of the poor.

No news of their miserable fellow-sufferers came nigh to those within Susa, all communication being cut off, and it was known that these, every man, woman, and child, would also suffer death upon the fourteenth day; therefore, spurned and oppressed as they were, they prayed alone in one great general body, and were loaded with incoherent cries for help in every place, and that God would avert the massacre at hand.

Moreover, the city and the civilised population became filled with an incredible wondering, since a strange and new code had, like a miracle, been suddenly established. This was the curious circumstance of a woman's presence before the Host, unasked by the mighty Potentate, and within the sacred precincts of the great audience court, wherein had never previously a woman trod or pleaded. The higher functionaries of the household of the King and Aman alike, argued this

in most mystic terms; more so the latter, whose personal dismay and alarm combined knew no bounds; "for," said he, "this woman 'Esther' ruleth the King's heart perceivably, otherwise she had suffered the full penalty general like unto the rest."

The sudden breaking-up of the King's audience after the appearance of Esther, and the apparent great consternation of Artaxerxes, became the common theme of the lesser rulers, princes, and servitors. Her beauty, her appearance in all her rightful legal splendour, had absorbed them, and vested their minds with an admiration new and strange.

Some compared her to the likeness of their favourite goddesses, others to "Sais" of Egypt; the Fire-worshippers of Bel designated her as a subject for the great God Himself; others, the philosophers of the State, ascribed to her, in the tone of Divine interpreters, the charm of ancient sorcery over man, since she had taken up the championship of her sex (albeit a Queen) over the rest of womenkind. In short, none of the Persians knew this humble creature rising from the crushed remains of the fallen tribes Judah and Benjamin to conquer the most powerful of their enemies, and the most mighty of his race, was the avenger of the destroyer, and the future companion and counsellor of the King, and destined to be of perpetual memory.

Aman, the highest functionary in the land, although captivated by the mark of distinction shown him, was none the less puzzled. He supped at the Queen's table that night, drank fully at the banquet of wine as the close companion of the two most powerful subjects of

inquiry and interest. Nothing was wanting to the completion of his greatness and honour but the quick despatch of the man he hated, whose dignified presence stood ever in his way, and whose clear insight into his own crafty, sordid nature ever detected that infamy and wrongdoing paramount in him. How the matter of the Queen's life would stand after this circumstance he could scarce question. Artaxerxes, whether knowing or not her lineage, had never allowed himself to ponder *rightly* over the full meaning of his awful decree, or how in like measure it involved also the life of the woman he loved immeasurably. It might have had the effect, had he thought of it, of appalling his senses with very horror; and had he secured good and noble advice, turned his irresolute heart, securing rather protection for these two desolated tribes instead of the destroyer's rod and an ignoble death for them.

The pagan Aman and other co-polygamists knew alone Esther was allied to the man Mardocheus; and the eunuchs who carried her messages, and the circumstances attached to this time of woe, were the only confidants. Moreover, though it may seem strange in a potentate of the East, whose every desire was ratified, and whose ire could be kindled in less than a moment, that a natural unrestrained jealousy had never showed itself in the matter of the Queen's relationship with the Jew Mardocheus. Rather, this venerable and intelligent man had momentarily inspired him, truly to be forgotten as a vision for the time.

Artaxerxes had his parasites, his wine-bibbers and flatterers, and his triple rod of iron wherewith to rule

them, but the profit was little. He would grow satiated and embittered with himself after a space, and desire something new, and a fresh field.

When Aman went again to his palace that night, he called for Zeresh. His coarse face was red and bloated by the heat of wine, and his eyes were restless and shifty. Over his skirt of yellow he wore a robe of blue, brodered with silver horns and emerald balls, a diadem like that worn by the women bound his stiffened hair behind his two ears, and his ankles and wrists were bejewelled to an effeminate degree. He had come from the Queen's palace, and was dizzy with wine, for he had eaten and drank prodigiously; he rolled down upon an ivory bench as Zeresh entered, exhausted and surfeited.

As she came in he dismissed the two fly-flappers, and bade her listen; "for," said he, "this night is almost the summit of my greatness. This woman is fairer than Ashtoreth, more glorious than the sun; even her words ring in the air and absorb me; moreover, I am great with her. The King is dumb, and, behold, again to-morrow hath she prepared *another feast*, and for only Aman and the King. My joy is almost complete."

"And if the King dies, wilt thou ask the woman to wife also?" asked Zeresh gravely, twisting a sharp bodkin fiercely round her thumb. "Does my lord also aspire to *that*?"

"Well," he blurted forth petulantly, "dost think I am a fool? Look to thy house, and question me nothing; but I, I value thee too, inasmuch as thy words ever benefit me. Wife, I do not forget thee in

mine own glory, so fret nothing. Have peace, Aman hath a mighty work at heart for thee also. What saidst thou to the slaves about the matter at mine heart, that I told thee of yesterday? Dost thou mind?"

"It shall be done," she returned, sullen and subdued.

"Ah—fifty cubits, understand, before our own gateway in two days. I have no more at heart but, at early morn, to see this scurrilous man picked to pieces by the carrion before mine eyes. Oh, how he derides me! He even gazes at me superciliously as though he were Aman and *I the Jew*. Fool—ape—heretic."

He sprang unsteadily now to his feet, suddenly muttering his daughter's name, "*Isis*," three times, and finally cursing her in every limb, desired also her death. He then called to the stars to smite her in the place whither she had gone. He blessed his sons in his delirium, and telling Zeresh to depart, forewarned her, lest she delayed coming to him on the morrow for the purpose of receiving his further instructions again concerning the gibbet for Mardocheus.

She sprinkled some reviving aromatics about him, and drew his mantle over his head, soliloquising tenderly. Then, after touching her fingers to the ground at his feet, besought him to be at peace. She called him "Master" thrice, but he replied not; his limbs outspread, front downward, his mitred diadem rolled aside, betokened a drunken sleep, and she then quitted the chamber, leaving him prostrate, snorting like an animal upon the stones.

At early morning a lieutenant of the chief eunuch of the audience chamber came and demanded the

Grand Chamberlain's attendance on the instant. It was very early.

He arose. "What is it?" he asked, sleepily.

"A caravan has arrived from the west," returned the man, "bringing plumages of rare value, also three sacks of sacred teeth, for the adorning of the Temple, with some black ivory and a few slaves! They ask for my lord on the instant!"

"Where is the report?" asked Aman, rising.

"With the chief trader, great master. There are also some ships arrived now in the quay freighted with gold, and bringing tithes for the King and great treasure"

"Enough,—go hence! I will be there. Send my slaves hither to me, and summon the clerks and the reed-bearers to the court with me. Stay—who is also there in waiting?"

"Gualgui the Syrian prince, and the scribe called 'Mardocheus.'"

"That accursed man again!" said Aman, bending his face downward, as if smothering the hatred he felt for the very name of the Jew. "Each time am I consumed with the hideous qualms, because this wretched infidel derides me with his persistent presence ever. Light of Bel, I would dare to appease my wrath" (looking toward the Temple) "on this man. Away! away to the court and then to the gibbet be my task!"

The man scarcely understood him. His impatience and surprise held him upon thorns. He stood irresolute.

"Well, fool!" echoed his master, "go, and say I come, as I said. I will not be devoured by the impossible; nay, I will crush the world first. I will raze up whole nations. Am I not the son of Ammedatha

the Amalekite, and the blood of my race, Agag, ariseth, saying, 'Kill, kill,' until every Jew upon earth be exterminated. To-morrow will I show my zeal, my power in the land. You shake, poor wretch. By Bel, it is not thou whom I hateth. Do thy duty, and thou art safe." (A smile passed over his visage.) "Go hence, carry my word, only be thou wary. Thou too shalt have an advancement, for I, Aman, say so; only be discreet and wait, but serve me well for *thy* reward."

The man cringed and stooped low before him. "The god's favour lights upon thee, O great master," he whispered, as he bent to kiss the flags at Aman's feet. "Hail, hail, and live in peace." But he, however, was repulsed with a low laugh, and went to do his master's bidding, and make his way across the square to the King's Court.

Meanwhile, the grand second only in the land hastily made himself ready for the duties before him that morning. He entered the Court of the King's House after the fashion of a monarch. Two eunuchs followed, bearing his insignia of office, then the servitors having his tablets of ivory, a sceptre-bearer, also a slave waving a perfumed censer,—all representative of his high position and his greatness.

Mardocheus was near his place; for although he was denied admittance as aforetime now into the inner chamber, he remained without, not ashamed of his habit, indicative of sorrow and mourning. He stood just upon the threshold of the Palace, calm, erect, proud, for unto the evil slayer he owed no homage. Though the elders, the rich, princes, and captains eyed him with disgust, he cared nought, and

was as much a man of power and distinction now as when in his youth he had served in the golden palace of Darius at Babylon, or entered the city of Jerusalem a great man and an honoured favourite of the King.

Aman, evincing little regard or curiosity, erewhile monotonously began enumerating accounts upon his tablets. He peremptorily questioned the traders, received the tithes without ceremony, and bought the women under a certain age in the name of the King for the royal harem.

A table of ivory received the piles of gold and silver coin. These were disposed of into a palm reservoir for banking, the merchants secreting their own portions into bags of hippopotamus hides for the markets in Babylon.

Aman, moreover, took charge of the precious stones in a capacious girdle, and dismissed the traders before dealing with the tribute bearers.

At this instant a messenger came swiftly to the days, and called Aman to attend the King in the bed-chamber on an important matter. Whereupon, charging Gualgui the Syrian to keep the audience awhile, he went within to the chamber of the King, as he had so desired of him.

After about the space of an hour he came forth again, his visage now depicting some savage amazement uncontrollable in him. He wore the King's signet, and a eunuch followed, bearing a massive chainlet. Three elders of the King, their hands crossed upon their breasts, their long sleeves touching the ground, came and stood in the centre around him who bore the seal. Also a pontiff from the

temple, habited in purple, and waving a candelabrum, chanted an incoherent anthem.

In the midst of this, as all this amazement with a sudden impulse, a great shout broke through the solemnity, and arose in the perfumed air a cry for "Mardocheus! Mardocheus! Mardocheus!!" Others joined in the call, and it was taken up without the King's gates, and traversed on like the speed of thought to the outer city entrance. "Come, Mardocheus, in the King's name, and stand forth."

The Jew arose, for he sat awhile to rest upon the high stones of the entrance. He had heard the cry, and stood up, scarce heeding.

"Art thou not Mardocheus?" asked a runner, "the scribe and the late servitor?"

He said, "Yea, even so, but *I* am a Jew."

"No matter, come ye within. The great King desireth thee, by the voice of the mighty Aman, his servant and friend. Hasten!"

But Mardocheus moved not. He stood in his sack-ing, and was not desirous to go from his place.

"*Aman*," he returned stedfastly, "is neither friend of the King or the people. I obey not the voice or word of Aman, I know him not in the spirit; nay, accuse me not, I say. If thou art so ordered to slay me, despatch me therefore quickly, that I may know no more ridicule. Behold, thou seest me. Do as I ask, but deride me no more in mine own misery."

The man, half-amazed, half-angry, screamed, "The King's voice calleth; wilt thou *deride the King*? I say, no harm is nigh unto thee. *Come and see!* Thou art picked out for distinction, thy time is

come, and the King's sacred word is to be read unto thee now in the inner court, whether thou art a Jew, Syrian, Ethiopian, or what. Go ye, take heed and be wise, O man, and hear the words of the Mighty One, for as yet thou knowest not."

He was softened, for recent grief had embittered him sorely, so that he was scarcely himself for very wonderment, but he followed the servant at last, and came within sight of the Palace Gate, which he had stood watching in the distance in his misery.

As he came through the portal, some fifty of the royal guard, clad in polished cuirasses, made obeisance to him. He started backward, scornfully. His raiment was of sackcloth, his beard dishevelled; his hair, matted together in coarse lumps, was covered with the ashes. Still they prostrated themselves to the stones before him; the spectators even multiplied, for the Court was rapidly filling with gaudy and jewelled attendants. He knew not the meaning of this. Yet voices cried, "Hail! friend and deliverer of the great King! Hail!"

But he stood upright, his eyes kindling with anger, the grey locks pushed back from his shoulders in utter regardlessness. He was erect, indignant, amazed, in all. His voice arose at last, and in a moment there was silence amid the vast throng.

"Wherefore," he said aloud, "this unseemly wickedness unto *me*? Am not I condemned enough already? Do not the groans of my people's woe forbid sleep to thine eyelids nightly? Anger the God of my fathers no more by reviling us further, for the time of retribution is nigh—nigh at hand!

"O wretched man," he continued, fixing his eyes

upon Aman, and uplifting his shrunken arms, "by the starvation of my body, by the bitter throes of hunger and suffering, not alone upon mine own flesh, but upon mine whole race, art thou accursed, because thou dost laugh and deride us in our calamity and woe, and bringeth *me* even to this place to torment me because of thine own evil aggrandisement. But the war wagheth, see ye to it, and the end is yet to come. O accursed man, both vile and reprobate! I have no reasoning in me at this hour that is in thy favour; but my God will judge ye well presently!"

Aman stood meanwhile, surrounded by his princes and servants. A great delirium of jealousy pervaded his nature. The King had, it was true, openly decreed that *he* should carry out the advancement of this man whom he hated, and had, unknowingly, brought into a repute and honour equalling his own.

He scowled fiercely upon him, and muttered silent imprecations; but nevertheless sternly bade Bygtha, the King's scribe, read out before Mardocheus and the assembly the words of the monarch, just written within his private chamber. A silence solemn and grave now ensued. The chief writer of the Court advanced slowly, and read from the papyrus roll the following words of the King:—

"Hearken, ye men of Susa,—Whereas it has come to our notice during the previous night again a certain grave omission, made by us unknowingly and to our regret, in granting no reward before this, suitable to recompense the act of one called Mardocheus, erewhile a servitor at our Courts, both at Jerusalem and in Susa the Palace, in that this just man waylaid the wicked designs of the two eunuchs, Gabatha and Tharra; and revealed their treachery unto us in our Queen's Palace, the space of twelve moons past. Moreover, in due acknowledgment of our esteem

and affection towards that saviour of our life, we have now taken the good advice of our most intimate friend Aman, and desire to show the working out of our will towards this man by appointing unto him a raiment of fine purple. Also, our wise and good minister Aman shall, according to his advice, deliver to this Mardocheus the golden chain of office, to be worn by him this day, and the state horse, in token of the great honour and the love the King bestoweth upon those who are so worthy. This mark of esteem shall go before the said Mardocheus our servant throughout the city this day; and as Aman hath with great discretion and kindliness reasoned with us, and so advised, so let this good man go before him whom I so reward, and proclaim the same before my people, as from my mouth.

“Sealed by the hand of

“ARTAXERXES THE GREAT KING.

“Unto the Court and populace at Susa, this day.”

The elders and principal legislators, many having assembled, looked almost in incredulous amazement. That Aman, the proud and principal statesman, the jealous upholder of *his own position*, should openly agree to give up his robes of office, his crowned horse, and, moreover, advocate *himself* the bearer of this man's good fortune, struck them as an impossibility. They were astounded at these measures.

The Chamberlain was known to be ambitious, and equally crafty and clever. He had wormed himself into the confidence of the King so indissolubly, that none ever now gained private speech with the monarch, none dared venture even a petition but through the hands of Aman firstly; then to proceed, if *he* so willed, unto the King. They knew not that Artaxerxes, always richly provided with a sense of justice, and ever full of a desire for reparation of wrong, had that morning again, through the effect of his diary, been brought to remember the past, and therefore had

cagerly questioned Aman upon the manner in which a man, loving his sovereign, and having rendered that sovereign a service of the most laudable species, *should be* rewarded, and at the same time mentioning neither what man was to be thus honoured, nor the service done unto him.

Aman, readily surmising none other but he himself could come so close to the heart of the King, and that he verily was the one for whom the other special mark of honour was to be given, fell immediately into his own net. He spoke with assurance concerning himself in reply to his master.

For, said Artaxerxes, upon receiving Aman's advice that a robe and jewelled chain of gold and a pompous public oration of the services rendered should be given, whereby the people might make obeisance to the same, and not a new garment, but the very robe of the Persian Supurbé himself. "Go *thou*, therefore, for thou hast the horse, the garment, and the chain. Inquire for one Mardocheus the Jew, and give him these things, and go before his horse also, and proclaim accordingly ; for thou art," continued he, "*my intimate friend*, and hast given me *this* good advice. Be thou, then, the minister of what thou hast advised me to do."¹

The command fell with inconceivable bitterness into the evil heart of the Chamberlain. He was filled with astonishment, speechless, the while that he turned his face, wrinkled with passion, from the King. Quivering in every limb, he cursed himself inwardly for his own folly.

Perceiving his alarm, and adjudging this to the tenderness of his feelings alone, Artaxerxes bade

¹ See Josephus, book xi. ch. vi.

Bygtha set down the words; and when so done, to carry them, with Aman, unto the Great Court, and so out upon the ears of the multitude at once.

Now Aman execrated Mardocheus. Notwithstanding, he peremptorily ordered, as he was bound, two eunuchs to hasten to his palace, and bring the state robes which the King had aforetime clothed him with, and to clothe this man.

An ecstatic smile illuminated the Jew's face when he realised *all*, and for a short space he stood and prayed; it was to him, this fierce passion of his enemy and his fatal mistake, only a ray of the prophesied light which was coming from out of the darkness around upon them in their misery. Firstly, he felt this Amalekite, not content with cursing their existence and working their destruction, still mocked at him in the coarse sackcloth and ashes of his sorrow.

Now, behold, the servants, the bodyguard of the King, the eunuchs of the Royal household,—all—all revered him.

It was genuine. It was as the voice of Xerxes—Xerxes, his dead master, whom he had loved and faithfully served.

He was now robed as a ruler in costly apparel, and seated with solemn dignity upon a sumptuously-caparisoned horse, while another beautiful animal from the temple, and guarded by six priests, was apportioned before the procession to carry the golden crown of office in the lead.

Meanwhile Aman, thus commissioned to bear the King's word, was made to traverse on foot, and to tell the multitude who came, and why honoured to so great a degree. "*But he was also remembering the gallows*"

—his murderous intent. It was, however, to the calm and longsuffering Jew only a grand ceremonial that bore to him no inward comfort, and it was but the thought of deliverance for all time that lighted up his devoted face, of which this was but the prelude.

Aman meanwhile was longing to flee to his house and connive there some means to utterly dissolve the mind of the King again toward fresh enmity for this one scion of the hated tribes. He would gash his dyed nails fiercely into his palms as he walked beside the horse, which he himself *alone* had ridden in his high state and office. He could have cut down the people one by one as they bowed themselves low before, not himself now, but the man he detested and meant to destroy so soon.

"O vile and abominable creature!" he said, in a low voice, maddened by wrath and envy. "Think not *thou* art *established* in the land. No! Remember the general decree. Shall not then both thou and thy cursed kinswoman perish? Ay, ay, there is no retreat for even thee now. The sacred word of Persia cannot be broken."

"Peace!" said Mardocheus calmly, as they halted by the Acropolis steps awhile. "*Peace!* for I tell thee the wicked *shall* not flourish, and thou art also among the smitten of God the Creator."

The Jew's eyes grew larger and luminous; full of some divine inspiration.

But Aman, still rife, feigning an artful speech before the people's eyes, replied, "I alone with the King sup at the Queen's table to-night; then I bid thee come and view the *gallows without my gates*. They are to be there this very night, behold, at midnight, high

and stately, they are like unto thee. O wise and kingly Mardocheus, how will it rest with thee when the roc and the owls pick thy flesh from thy bones, and this *before* the sword of general destruction sweeps off thy whole tribe? Ay, shalt thou not go first?"

Mardocheus lifted his wand, not heeding him. "Proceed," he called loudly, "I serve the King, and God my Master; ye people! these will render me justice, and my race retribution. Peace for the King! Proceed! On! Cease! for I am but poor, honour me not yet!"

They passed through the city ways, and reached the Court again at eventide. Aman hastened from the sight of this grandeur to his own chamber to ponder.

He found it empty, deserted. In the agony of his impious and revolting passion, he rolled upon the floor, biting his lips, and striking himself like an infuriated *nomad*. Then he had recourse to wine. He drank feverishly; finally he summoned his slaves and Zeresh his wife—the former to prepare him for the Queen's table, and to the latter he commissioned the carrying out of their plans to hang Mardocheus as a traitorous malefactor before the gate of their house on the morrow morning with all speed, ere the city arose.

"How can thy accusation be ratified?" she asked. "How prove this man now—"

"Aby," he responded. "Aman's word is chief in the ear of the King ever. Thou knowest!!"

"Continue," she replied, as he waited significantly for her to understand.

"The King hath a murderous traitor ready to smite him, a man already under the penalty to die—a *Jew*!"

"Ah, accursed!" she cried, "accursed by Bel, 'tis

Mardocheus, who is to cut off the life of the King, wilt thou say? Good, my lord, I understand!"

"Silence, woman! thy tongue is becoming too loose. Speak no more now, but make ye ready the things necessary; they will be used, I say, to-morrow; that is all. By the horns of Bel, by my wretched daughter, whose eyes I would gather yet for the god's consecration, my words never fail me! See to it!"

She answered suavely, for she knew he was wroth, "So, my lord, even so. The opportunity is great, for thou art mighty, and favoured highest in the land. Fear not. And truly, it pleaseth me. Only the sight of this scurrilous man to spoil the whole, and annihilate my lord! But nay, it shall not be," she continued, to appease him. "Go to-night, lift up thy head, crawl at the feet of the King, speak without fear; he will give to *thee* anything, and even the body of thine enemy also."

"I know, I know. Thou art wise and shrewd for a woman, Zeresh—most wise. Thou seest clearly, and thou art no hindrance—no hindrance *as yet*."

This he reiterated over and over again. He fancied he was embodied with the shadow of the god. Then he pressed her to curse Isis, her daughter, thus, and to persistently charge her women with committing horrors, to freeze them into confessions of her guilt.

Meanwhile Mardocheus came within the audience-chamber of the King for advice. But it chanced that he was on his way to sup with the Queen, and would send word to no man.

Two eunuchs from the palace of Esther came hastening with their wands of office. These made their way to the house of Aman.

Memucan, the seventh of the Magi, then came to Mardocheus, and said, "The King fretteth because my lord Aman tarrieth long. It seems the Queen's table waits, and they do not sup until he arrives, and, see, he cometh not even yet."

Mardocheus asked, "What saith the Queen, therefore, that I shall do?"

He answered—"She saith, '*It is well*, but depart not from the gate of the King's House.' And she bade me bring to thee the word '*Dragon*,' which I have even told unto thee for thine understanding alone."

And Mardocheus, far from perplexity or doubt, uplifted his face, and looking heavenward, said, with marked reverence, "Ay, *she doeth well*, and will unveil the charge from our God to-night. *I will stay here*. Peace be to thee, O prince! Let me take my rest awhile here until the word comes to me, as she hath said."

"What word?" asked Memucan, dubiously.

"The word of the God of Israel, and who walketh the universe upon the four winds of heaven."

Memucan looked half-amazed, incredulous, as though he was in the presence of a madman. He laid his fingers upon his brow, however, and left the palace, leaving the Jew, still habited in his purple dress, waiting alone in the palace court.

A few slaves noiselessly crossed the threshold, and the King's guard formed an array of dark bodies without. Only at intervals came the sound of the cymbals and lutes, borne on the breeze from the Queen's Palace across the gardens and the canes, and the murmurs of the crowd assembled to see the King and Aman, his favourite, pass.



CHAPTER VIII.

THE QUEEN'S HOUSE.

THE adorers and flatterers of Aman stood aside, cringing low, to allow him to go on his way to the White Palace. He was decked very royally; his conical cap, jewelled and fastened like the King's, was set upon his triple rows of perfumed hair. There was an absurd display of sycophantic popularity evinced by the people; his opponents even were silenced in his presence, and the gorgeous pomp he ever displayed was paramount now.

Like other parasites of the liberality of an inexperienced and delusive monarch, he would have murdered his sovereign to obtain the coveted authority himself, for he aspired to pomp and grandeur alone. He was, as depicted in other pages, even ferocious in his quondam position and passions, and yet no man had yet dared to *openly* accuse him. If this had even been the case, there were still the remaining six of his sons to avenge their father. To effect an absolute change in the kingdom was, therefore, to entirely wipe out the whole family, who gloried in the vocations which fell to their portion, wherein they could wield their despot rod, and call it the "*command of the King.*"

These other factors held drunken revelries like the monarch; they were apportioned habitations, clothed, and tended like the King. Honours were awarded

them, not altogether by Artaxerxes, but by Aman in his name. The adulation of many for this man was disgusting.

In his house, a museum of impious mockery, he would oft impersonate certain gods. He imbibed the love of the Persians for enormous eating, and majestic barbarism therewith. An extravagant atrocity would oftentimes pervade his senses, his wine-pot was streaming with libations to the popular deity of his house; while the gynæconomes (inspectors of the feast), with shaven heads and oily bodies, crept about the scene like so many women. An offending slave, for scratching himself with a spatula, was served oft as an after-dainty, to appease the mind for some sort of atrocity. This miserable wretch was made to digest, in a state of nudity, a talent of molten silver.

Yet Aman's orgies were licensed by the friends who surrounded him; and Artaxerxes knew not to what extent this man whom he had thus indiscreetly upraised over the nation, and in whom he imposed implicit trust, held his status at the expense of his master's name. This Darius, unlike his wiser progenitors, gave the reins over to a wretch, whose bare word wielded his unreasonable and wayward heart awhile. And thus, while hordes of commingled races—comprising Ethiopians, Jews, Medes, Persians, Macedonians, Lybians, Utopians, and many others—were led captive, and bore the stings of a derisive humility in miserable slavery, with not the power of a righteous resentment given them.

But the two races of Judah and Benjamin, enemies to the Amalekites aforetime, were more stubborn than any, less cringing, and still willing to remain a caste

by themselves. Not, therefore, obeying the dictates of these rulers, they came under the bitterest of scandals and horrible mutilations; and for the very room in the land they took from the Fire-worshippers, and like devotees to idols, were accursed throughout all the state as useless monopolisers.

Stewards of various households, going to the markets at appointed hours with their slaves as bearers of the food, would scoff at and hustle these inoffending people far from the place, then spit scornfully after them, as though their presence had been so much impure offal; while small children were kidnapped as victims to Bel, or to serve the megalopsychies of the temple of the god.

Meanwhile the Chamberlain, listening to the profuse adulations of the men around, came at last to the peristyle of the Queen's house.

Ascending the steps, he stood and looked around him. He felt profound, swelled to the outer skin of his body with the loftiest spirit of pride. His greatness exceedeth the mightiest, he felt; for he was the chosen *of all* to sit with the King and his wife at meat, to eat and drink as a King himself. Now was opportunity given for the one great business of his heart, which surrounded him. He intended scurrillously unveiling his enemy, and he swore inwardly that he would weave the subtilty of poison in the jealous heart of the King concerning this peri also, which held for the while supreme rule therein.

Day by day the execution of the King's decree in the land drew nearer. A few more sunsets, and the great orb of the light would sink only upon the dead bodies of all the enemies of his person and race

throughout Persia and India. Notwithstanding, for vengeance' sake alone, he would take occasion to hang that *one* who lauded his position as on an equality with himself.

He prided his sagacious wisdom in this strength of purpose, and looked towards the gates of his palace with anxious and penetrating eyes. They were now raising the gallows high up before the terrace, higher than the lofty gates themselves. He saw the bodies of the workers moving irregularly at their work. It was gloomy, and a glow of satisfaction momentarily pervaded his dark visage; he felt master of the whole situation, and innumerable phantasies crossed his mind. He saw the plains, the city squares, the terraces, encumbered with the dead—the Jews exterminated; the whole nation, the idolatry, the legions of the guards, priests, populace—all, all in subjection under his own feet. Then the jasper and marble palaces, the houses of the women, the costly treasury and beautiful gardens, all the *acmé* of Oriental splendour and taste, open to *him* alone—[“Aman, ruler of the hundred and twenty-seven provinces,” for the King was *no more*, and a new *régime* ordained.] A gasp of exultant joy gurgled in his throat, and he awoke from his dream because a sound had entered his ears suddenly. A long line of black bodies, girded by loin-cloths only, were subject upon their faces along the mosaic terrace at his feet, and the sweet notes of the lutes and timbrels came through the entrances. He turned from his vision of greatness, and saw standing the Queen's eunuch of the household, called Sucbuchadas, regarding him steadfastly. This man had been appointed over the

Queen's household at the last moon, and was to keep in office for twelve more to come. The Chamberlain looked disturbed, his eyes dropped a moment. Suchbuchadas remained looking at him significantly, whereupon he was annoyed.

Aman then asked, "What do you conceive? Is Moloch or Bel thy god? Stand thou not amazed because *I choose* in supplication to watch the marvels of the god of the land. 'The infinite, who hath the jaws of the seven dragons, and whose orbits flash fire, and send forth scorpions to the enemy, the unruly, whose facetiousness mocketh thee. O lofty, all-prevailing as thou art, these have cared nought for thee! Yet crush them, and devour their dead in the midst of them, O Bel, wise and mighty!'"

Suchbuchadas returned, "Thou art a Baal, therefore, and yet seeketh *justice*."

He answered, "Yea. Why, why asketh thou?"

"What meaneth yonder gibbet at this hour? Hast thou a malefactor, or a high feast of victims in store? The lugubrious hymn of the priests cometh upon the wind hither. I hear them, my lord! Behold, too, the sentinels' lances; they guard the city! Wherefore so high a gallows for an *ordinary* culprit? Is not this a King's son to be condemned before the multitude?"

Aman looked disturbed, but answered politically, "No! For the traitor! Judge not my jurisprudence; look to thy own affairs. Doth the state rely on thee? Tell me."

"No, not the state, in truth; but the King's house and treasury is *my* charge."

"Meddle not, then, with the state," answered Aman

peremptorily. "Look to thy women. Why camest thou here to question *me*?"

"My lord, the King requireth thee. The meat waiteth, and I was directed to seek thee thus!"

"Proceed, then, thou eunuch! I am at hand, so conduct me, and meddle not, as I said."

He looked disdainfully, clapped his hands, and two fan-bearers stealthily came to him. They had been dismissed until the signal should be given, now they walked in the rear, their bodies steaming with the heat, and emitting an unguentous odour of perfumed oil, which covered them. They passed through a lofty court, on the walls of which were depicted images of the genii of the gods. Massive balustrades of porphyry and gold surrounded this entrance to the audience-chamber, over which was set an emblem of the sun. The doorway of the apartment ahead was framed by heavy tapestry, fringed with silver and yellow cords. Here stood painted slaves in their military accoutrements; some, a little distance in the interior, bearing censers of smoking, perfumed powders. These men were tattooed about the breasts, and wore massive golden discs in their ears. Aman's procession passed through the corridor, where, suspended in jewelled lamps, coloured lights were burning upon the polished walls of brass, reflecting all, like in a mirror. At the end of this place an array of the King's apple-bearers stood silently.

Without the doorway of the banquetting hall, upon lances of polished silver, these bright emerald apples, an insignia of high official duty, shone like green stars. The men lowered their weapons and stood with their hands placed to foreheads in

obeisance upon the approach of Aman. He was near the presence of the monarch now, and supreme loftiness encompassed him again, the memory of his great, cherished desire filling his soul once more. Here they drew out the folds of his tunic, perfumed his raiment with myrrh, and then withdrew backward. He stood a moment ere they ushered him within the sacred chamber to contemplate himself.

His hair, coiffed like the fashion of the god, gave his sinister face a still wilder expression. Upon his dark, bare flesh the jewelled agraffs, necklets, bangles, and rings shone resplendently; while a small crowd of slaves were in the rear and at the sides, prostrate, very curious to look upon this great man as he came slowly forward. These threw themselves impetuously around him, faces to earth, calling out, "Hail! O friend of the eye of Baalim! Mayst thou live for ever, and flourish like a cloud over the land after the shades receive thee."

Upon the great ebony landing stood numberless women-slaves—the Queen's—wearing bluish garments and veils of a sea-green hue. These struck their lyres mournfully, murmuring at the same time, uttering flattering acclamations. They were principally the dancers of the Court.

As he passed the tapestried alcove, the two personal attendants of the Queen met him. These women wore sandals, in distinction of their high service, and in contrast to the barefooted slaves. Both also had bandeaux of gilt upon their foreheads, their lips were vermillioned, and their eyes were lined with antimony. A formidable eunuch, yet effeminate and smiling, stood behind.

When they saw the Chamberlain slowly approaching, they moved aside, the women covering their faces in their veils while he passed. He paused, however, again. The apartment was empty of the general array of necessary battalions that formed the retinue of the royal household. He looked bewildered. The chamber, a long, lofty apartment, opened out upon the hanging gardens around the terraces, commanding a rare view of the best portion of all the metropolis and the surrounding plains.

The odour of the pomegranate, oleander, and orange blossom pervaded all the interior; and a breeze from off the river came floating through the open doors, gently waving the purple hangings to and fro. A great quiet prevailed. Aman meanwhile continued to advance, his head lowered, his bejewelled fingers crossed over his breast as he saw the King.

Artaxerxes sat without his officers, upon a raised dais nigh to the garden doors, and regarded the approach of his Chamberlain with apparent interest and concern.

The Queen, having just come within, dismissed her tiring-women, and was also standing by the great stone disc upon which the King's cupbearer had placed the cistern of red wine, and thus they awaited him. Aman saw her, and was stimulated by false pride in being welcomed to the table of the most beautiful woman in the nation, and in company with none other but the King himself.

She was not arrayed as when seen the day previous at the Court, nor so sumptuously as on the evening previous. She had seemingly laid aside her gorgeous robes of state and most of her jewels, for she now

appeared wholly in white, studded with silver. A silver girdle was drawn loosely around her waist, and sandals of the same pure metal were upon her feet, laced across by cords of silk. For her head-gear, a loose bandelet of hyacinth gauze drew in the loose, long masses of her dark hair, and revealing her features very clearly.

Aman paused beside the dais, and contemplated the King his master. His full, dark eyes bent kindly upon his Chamberlain. The monarch was magnificent, kingly in the extreme, withal condescending, and gentle as a woman upon this occasion.

Aman addressed Artaxerxes, after prostrating himself upon the shallow steps, strewn with costly fabrics and skins. "Hail! most Mighty One of the nations! All hail! eye of the highest god Bel! for who is like thee, O great King and master of eternal generations to come? Behold, thy servant is here; speak seasonably in the presence of the Queen, I beseech, as pleaseth thee."

The pearls suspended to his mitred tiara rattled upon the plaques of his shoulder ornaments. He was meditating in the bottom of his crafty heart yet more derision and treachery; and further, that this month Dystrus should see the carrying out of his cherished and villanous design, and bring about an alliance with the Persians and his own race, when the irrevocable decree of the King had been carried out within the short space ahead. He scarce yet dared to waylay the monarch at the very table of his Jewish wife. The domain had changed since she had with her women inhabited it, and all those moveable signs of the gods of the land, such as Vashti had particularly

appointed, had been cast out. The very air was now filled with the unique, soft sounds of the cynras, nabla, and cymbalum—all sweet-toned instruments of the new Queen's race—which breathed to him of the reorganisation this woman had made throughout her own dwelling to her own taste. Notwithstanding all these things, he was inwardly convinced that the power of his word could efface even these from the land and memory of them with reasoning from the King's heart, after a little season had passed.

The law of a Persian monarch *could never* be revoked. What matter, then, these fascinating arts, attributable alone to the prevailing reign of a new woman over the household of the late repudiated Queen? The just decree issued from the lips of the Potentate *must* now be obeyed, and in the carrying out of it should not Esther also fall with her condemned people? Then, over the ruins of the old dynasty of the Darius's, Aman would found a new, indefensible monarchy, to rival even the great Babylonian Nebuchadonoser, King of the East, in the past.

Artaxerxes smiled. "Arise," he said, "arise, O my friend!" He reached forth his hand, and laid it upon his counsellor's shoulder. "O my most worthy Aman, who loveth me most! come, eat, drink, and rejoice at the good bounty of our beloved Queen."

"Great King," he responded lowly, "mine heart weeps with joy. The desire to ratify this sublime honour almost suffocates me; and as I scan thy face and the countenance of the Queen, truly her beauty excellet the stars, and the sound of her voice is like unto rippling of gentle waters."

"Drink, friend," responded the monarch; "drink of the cup here prepared. Yea, sup freely, and desire a long existence unto us all, for the Queen hath so prepared it for us this night, and in our honour."

Aman seized almost mechanically the golden vase proffered him, and drank deeply. Then they availed themselves of the viands supplied upon the low board.

Esther herself tended the King, and served him dainties upon rare ivory plates; while the players upon their ebony lyres stood in the alcoves, and women-slaves sang sweetly to accompany them, during the meal.

She had thus prepared for him a solemn banquet, such as men love, but in the grave grandeur of isolation from the noisy carousal of state. It was now dreamy calm, serene; only her voice, arising sweet and plaintive, pervaded their senses as they sat before her.

A mystic beauty, after the fashion of a spirit unknown, seemed to cover her in its subtle mist. She appeared to Artaxerxes taller, and unlike the Macedonian or Persian women in general; for her face was exceedingly youthful and fair, her limbs symmetrical and lithe, and filled with grace at every step. When she clapped her small hands thrice, the principal eunuch, with his attendant slaves, richly-garbed, softly cleared the meats from sight, and rearranged the table.

The cupbearers then brought freshly-spiced wines, in massive vases of gold. Snow from the mountains of Assyria wherewith to cool the same was piled in bowls of red Tyrian glass, after which the fruit-bearers came in, bearing ivory and silver horns,

filled with luscious fruits from the gardens without—the pomegranate, preserved in fine cane sugar, and melons—great golden caskets, upon which were engraved faces of goddesses Astarte, Tanit; also Anubis, Belus, and Apis, relics of pristine pomp—these exquisite ewers were filled with fruits of the vine; also sacred apples, such as only eaten at the King's table, suffused with virgin honey, and many other choice viands, came in from the side-chambers, where the household officials waited by command of the Queen, all spellbound with wonder at her calmness. Now also, for this banquet of wine, or second feast, huge candelabrams were lighted. Upon the terraces without the polished censers threw out little ruddy lights, and fumes of odorous musks over the shrubberies.

Aman then grew loquacious, for he had received such felicitations from the King that he now spoke, under the influence of much wine, personally, and with a less reverence than heretofore.

Then said Artaxerxes, looking with absorbing attention and delight upon Esther notwithstanding, "Behold, O Aman, the sole originator of our joy! let us drink still again into the wine-cups that our Queen hath provided. Behold, the favour of our *mutual* love unto thee is great; it exceedeth that evinced unto any man in the past. Harken! what chanced to the good Mardocheus in the procession this day? Tell us. I will summon him to me to-morrow, that I may speak also mine own words of gratitude, so long omitted by me, unto him. Stay, stay awhile," and he raised his hands to silence Aman a moment. "Queen Esther hath a request.

Now, behold, is it not *first in our heart to-night*? 'Twas hither we came for to hear such; and as the King liveth, and the spirit of my fathers kindle within me, have I sworn to grant her this request, be it to the half of my kingdom."

She lifted the sleeves of her long tunic, and, bending, veiled her face with them before him.

"True, my lord," she said. "Ay! joy, peace, and honour shelter thee from the enemy, and from the sting of the deadly viper. Live for ever, reign supreme, and delight the world with thy justice—*equitable justice*; and the people shall bless thee, O King."

He pressed still forward, animated with joy. She had never spoken so before. He lifted the hem of her veil, and laid it to his lips; then, gently disentangling it, uncovered her face again.

"Our second father and most intimate friend is he who sups at our table, whom, like unto the King, should the Queen also esteem highly and honour. Behold! he is alone worthy to look upon thy face. Unveil, be not afraid! O beloved, nothing shall harm thee. Speak comfortably; I can deny thee nothing, as I swore; so keep I mine oath, not regretfully, but with joy in thy presence, and that of our good friend, Aman the wise."

She answered him firmly, "This servant of my lord hath not yet replied to *thy desire* to know concerning this Mardocheus, surely," she murmured, half-disconcerted. "Therefore *I the Queen* may so request, as my lord hath said."

"What saith the people of the advancement of

Mardocheus the Jew, and how took *he the honour?* Tell us this. Yea, yea, answer, O Aman, my brother," vociferated Artaxerxes, warmly.

The Grand Chamberlain, however, wished not to openly speak of the plot he had at heart, nor to justify the reason why he should upon the morrow execute this Jew on his own account. He desired the King *alone* for that matter. He knew this earnest, deep-thinking, young woman would wholly frustrate his design immediately. Therefore she must not know on anywise, now that her kinsman was to die the death of the malefactor upon the morrow; this must all be done in silence.

He returned evasively, "Nay, my lord. I do beseech the Queen to speak first. All has been intelligent to-day, O King. As thou desired, so I have followed out thy dictates justly. Thy safety mingles even in mine own life. I am ever filled with the desire to urge the adoration of the people yet more profoundly for thee alone. I herewith, seeking the light of justice, have discovered the evil ones, and, by the aid of the god, do unveil the mysteries woven to inveigle thy sacred life into the meshes of a monstrous and shameful sacrifice. I—I penetrate—the most remote assignation, I surround those who secretly creep to encompass their thoughts with wicked deeds. Yet I wait stealthily, O mighty King, and I strike them instantly. I never fail, for I plunge my rod, and root them out from earth on the lifting of an eyelid."

He attempted this allegorical language to set aside the subject. It appeared lofty and sublime.

Two ushers now came to the entrance to beseech,

in the name of Tais, the Egyptian maiden of the Queen, a word imperative to the royal mistress.

The Queen said, "Bid her come within."

But the woman, trembling and nervous, fell down near the pillars and cried out, "Mistress, it is Sucbuchadas who desireth speech with thee. He tarryeth without now, and" (continued she in a lower key, for only Esther's ear) "death compasseth the just, and is nigh to thine own door. I pray thee, step without; for evil works this very night to thy gracious kinsman. A word alone, my mistress!"

Esther recalled Aman's words of a moment ago. She seemed to penetrate their significance instantly. Swiftly turning herself to face her guests, she looked upon them and waited. A deep sigh arose from her heart. Irresolute, yet calm, she passed Aman, and stood before the dais of the King. He had been intently observing her, for, seeing her advance, he held out to her his jewelled cup, saying eagerly—

"My beloved, drink! What troubleth thee? Say!"

Taking the vessel, she moved slightly toward Aman, and, lifting her eyes aloof, she gazed upon Artaxerxes, and spoke clearly, whilst she raised the gilded cup to pledge her guests—

"My lord, my lawful husband and sovereign! here do I perceive my rightful duty, and I herewith also do commend myself unto thee, and unto my lord Aman, to do justly the work that is within mine heart. I take the cup, and I drink; notwithstanding, I pray thee leave to take myself without, at the request of the chief of my household. Then mayst great Aman, O King, thy intimate friend and mighty counsellor,

speak of the weighty matter which troubleth his mind. Ay, behold, I do drink, that my lord may perceive I honour his word, despising the traitor; yet retaining my lord the King's promise to give unto me the desire of my heart, also the request that doth pertain unto the same. And I have perceived that the words Aman doth contrive in speech with my lord are unseemly for the ears of women, yet I would judge not but that which appeareth unto me."

Lifting the cup to her lips, she drank; then, giving it into the cupbearer's hand, she bowed before them, saying, "I go without to prepare a surprise. Behold, ye may now speak that which is not for mine ears, since so it seemeth good unto my lord."

Aman paled a moment, scarce comprehending. Neither of the men replied, for she withdrew slowly, and disappeared behind the hangings in silence. Four of her women came instantly to her side, then fell back in the rear and followed her footsteps. They passed through a little stone passage, which led out to a spiral flight of stairs upward. Reaching the top, Esther entered a small chamber which overlooked the eastern extremity of the city. The roof of blood-coloured granite was supported by fluted columns, to which bright-coloured lights were fixed at every cubit height. Golden calabashes hung suspended from the ceiling, these being inlaid with precious sapphires and beryls. These calabashes were filled with scented balm and various other aromatics, in preparation for the Queen's household and her personal use. Having no outer walls to this apartment, very light curtains, looped with silver cords to

the outer pillars, gave an airy appearance to the eye, and revealed to view the Queen's pleasure gardens below, also the King's house, the Customs, and Metropolis squares, and the house of Aman nigh unto the chief gate, as magnificent as all beside.

She went to the balustrade of the perfume chamber and momentarily looked out, then turned gravely, saying to her women, "Bid Sucbuchadas come hither, and say I await him. Let him tarry not a breath ; I have work at hand to do."

As soon as the women carried her word and had passed without, an ineffable sadness pervaded her countenance. Murmuring inwardly, she said, "By the God of my fathers, I shall not fail this night ! The spirit spoke so to me. It grows dark now, and I must hasten back ; for perchance Aman poisoneth the King's mind, even while I am absent, and there remains but this night for my work."

Then Sucbuchadas entered alone, his earrings and bangles glistening with the rays of the coloured lamps which fell upon him. He was suffused with a visible outward nervousness, for his lips trembled ; yet his voice, as he spoke supplicatingly to the Queen, gave her the assurance that some mighty weight was upon him, and he was endeavouring to speak explicitly and quickly some important matter.

"Mardocheus, O my mistress !" he said, "I have seen him."

She uttered a monosyllable twice, in a plaintive voice. "Yea, yea ! Well, speak !"

"O Queen, I am thy servant alone ; yet this servitor of the great King called me to him. I hastened then,

for I perceived his meaning. He stood, as thou hadst bade, in waiting in the outer court of the great King's house, and I went thither—thither, yonder."

She twisted her small fingers together in the agony of approaching evil. Her bosom throbbed fearfully with her agitation of mind.

"Proceed!" she said, resolutely, notwithstanding. "Be not afraid, O Sucbuchadas! What said this Mardocheus, then?"

"Mistress, the heavens consume me, and I am absorbed, because fear compasseth me, behold, lest I might also hang upon *yonder gallows* for my words—for my message even unto thee. For *Aman rules!*"

She stood forth before him, her feet planted firmly upon the stones, her hands clenched in a paroxysm of anguish and curiosity combined.

"I am mistress of this house," she uttered in a tone of quiet command. "I am the wife of the great King. Answer me, therefore; for I will in nowise permit aught to waylay my servant that doeth to me and mine good service. Listen, and fear nothing, but render unto me thy explanation, and what is thy meaning in truth."

He fell before her again, trembling with fear. "Ere, O Queen, thy servitor Mardocheus called me to bring thee word, I perceived those gallows yonder; for has not Prince Aman caused them to be erected this night upon the gates before his house, and hath secretly condemned this very man whom to-day my lord the King hath so honoured, to hang thereon before the sun sets to-morrow, condemned as a vile malefactor?"

He paused. She spoke nothing, but, covering her hands before her face, wept. The tears coursed down her face beneath the thin gauze of her veil, while Tais sought to comfort her. Then she walked to the fore, and looked upon the spot Sucbuchadas had pointed out to her. Lifting her eyes higher, they dwelt upon the wide expanse of firmament, seeking to penetrate the red glow permeating the blue-grey pall of the heavens above.

"O Designer of the vast expanse, the great universe yonder!" she called, plaintively, "Thou knowest, Thou ordainest, and seeth how the unrighteous flourish in the land. Thou knowest that the land of Thine elect mourneth in dust and ashes—the land of Thy promise, Thine own! When Thy word goeth forth, peace reigneth at Thy wrath, nations tremble. Thou art infinite, wonderful, utterly above all in heaven or earth—even so. I am a desolate woman, and suffering among the stricken and desolate people of my race. Hear me, hearken, and give me power!—great power for Thee, O King of the nations. . . .

"We are in sore affliction ; none hath come so nigh unto death as now, and the sword will abolish Thy handmaid and Thy servants from off the earth, which is Thine own. Let not the wicked prevail!—Turn unto them their own devices, and they that call upon idols to fall. Inasmuch as Thou Infinite, All-wise, and Ineffable knoweth, these enemies have derided us because we call not unto false gods or idols, or worship a fleshly king as a god. Now, I pray in this last moment, deliver us! Give me eloquent speech in my mouth before the lion. Turn his heart to hate

him that fighteth against us! Turn his heart! for Thou knowest also I have not until this last eaten at the table of our enemies, nor drank with the wicked and ungodly, but have abhorred *all mine high estate*. Now come I to the test. My face, ay, my heart, turneth towards Thee; for I pray, above all, that Thou wilt be with me in this hour of my trial, and give unto me both power and strength; and let my sorrow and my people's afflictions turn to joy and perpetual thankfulness hereafter—hereafter."

The change worked upon her countenance then was very marked; a quietude lulled her in the serenest repose. She turned, and said unto them calmly—

"Come, come, follow me! I know *all*. All is in my memory, all open unto me. I am now quickened, and mine eyes are not deceived; but the purifying is to-night. See ye, and follow me to the King." Thus she laid her hands upon the breast of her long, snowy simarre, and, passing quickly through the same way she had come, re-entered the banqueting room, and stood in the presence of the King again.

At the sides her women now stood. Without the alcoves were slaves of her household, and also the King's bodyguards in array of splendour. These were innumerable. A solemn grandeur spread over everything—a silence giving mystic charm to her presence, wholly wrapt in a divine garb of resignation, through which shone queenly command and determination. Thus Esther stood to work Jehovah's will for her people before the lion of the nations, and also before the vengeful Amalekite.



CHAPTER IX.

DENUNCIATION OF THE SERPENT.

SOFTLY the nabra's tones came again mingling with the sound of the Queen's voice as she spoke. Standing sorrowful and humbly in the distance, irregardless of what might have ensued during her temporary absence, she placed herself before Artaxerxes, and looked into his face plaintively, her eyes speaking volumes. Aman shifted somewhat restlessly. He sat now upon an ebony bench, with a golden footstool at his feet. His visage was paler than usual, his eyes rolling in their orbits, bloodshot and watery. His spatula was headed with a serpent's fangs closed, and within a massive emerald darted forth rays of a brilliant green.

She stood, in striking contrast to the two guests of her table; for the veil was removed again from her face, and revealed the beauty of her symmetrical neck, and her white arms folded meekly in the purple silk which composed her long bandelets.

Artaxerxes lowered his eyes. They fell upon her as before, eagerly. He appeared dazzled by the solemn glory of her face and person. She was to him again as a vision of the goddess of the Zidonians—as pure, immaculate, holy, and wonderful; so that he uttered a sharp, distinct sigh.

Then she spoke with a low, sweet cadence in her

tones, looking at him steadfastly, yet humbly, "O my King! give me *now leave* to speak my request!"

"Beloved," he returned, dreamily. "Queen Esther, speak! Nay, what wouldst thou? Come nearer! Come nearer yet! I am mindful of thee, above all."

It seemed to her the voices of the mighty heaven descended down into her ears. She felt their power coursing over her limbs, her soul. She desired to pour forth this soul in one word. It was *the last* extremity; the harmony of his gracious words now sank into her heart like a symbol of assignation from the God of heaven, in answer to her prayer alone.

"O beloved of my soul!" he continued, passionately, "what is thy desire? Come ye near to me; fear not! By my throne have I not sworn? Look not so upon me fearfully, lest I awake to find thee a creature of the gods, *so* beloved, and sent forth but to tantalize me alone. Speak ye comfortably to me. I can refuse thee nought—nought."

She took a step further toward him, then, with a smile radiating her face, she sank at his feet. Clasp-
ing the gilded dragon's head that formed the front of his footstool, in a pleading posture—

"O King, mighty Master of the hundred and twenty-seven provinces from Indus to Ethiopia! now hearken unto thine handmaid and thy wife. If so be I have ever been favourable in thy gracious sight, or if, as on a certain day in my garden I did once observe thee, and dared to think thee another lesser man than the greatest monarch upon earth, yet withal found kindness in thine eyes towards me, and sweetness in thy voice: O hearken, I beseech thee, now unto me;

ay, not only hearken unto me, my King, but let thine heart enter into mine own, and judge of the things therein admirably." She lifted her hands above.

"I come to thee this night, as in like footsteps I walked once in mine honourable vocation as thy lawful wife and Queen. Inasmuch as I, at the cost of death, sought thy presence then, so now I desire to speak with thee openly before the servants of my house whom thou hast given unto me, and before this man now seated at my table, and in the fashion of my lord the great King's friend. Give ear, O King!

"I was brought hither from Babylon in my virginity, and I desired no glory, O King, at thy hands. Then I was not worthy but to consider myself as thy slave and servant, in my low estate. But, lo! thou didst assign me unto great honour and love—didst set upon my head the crown of my high estate, and place the sceptre of honour within my hands! Now I am thy wife, and I see my lord as a mighty potentate, having chariots and horsemen, many nations under dominion, much tribute, and the laws of the land are in thy lips. Now, O King, I was so set in my holy state, and I received the power vested upon me in the *name of a Queen*, inasmuch as, in my grief and desolation of heart, I did put upon me my royal robes, and sought the audience-chamber of my lord (whether my God designed me to perish thereunto or not). And I went thither to open mine heart unto thee. But my eyes then grew full of fear, lest I saw then my lord transformed from an angel of life unto an executioner, and who in anger would send me forth to die on the instant. Not so! Yet my heart failed me, and I sank down. That, O King,

my husband, ay, master—that woe covering thy wife then, is verified trebly this very night unto me; for, behold, *I am to die!* yea, hear me—for I am sold, am by thine own hand doomed to perish with my unhappy people on the fourteenth day of this month of Adar—alone, by the order of thy own great and general decree that we, ‘the Jews,’ are to perish by the hand of the slayer. Yet am I not the Queen none the less? I am made thy loyal wife, and yet am I to suffer the malefactor’s death, despite my crown and position?”

The King, suddenly convicted, half-sprang forward to raise her in his arms, a frenzied grief crossing his visage meanwhile. Aman also arose, but she further tokened them to heed her a little longer.

“Further, listen, I pray, O my lord! *further listen*; for I speak unto thee alone.

“My soul pleadeth even in the dust this night at thy feet, and my heart also goeth out unto thee in this utter misery and woe, lest thou wilt aid me not, and extend to me and mine that pity for which is this my sole prayer.

“My lord, *I am a Jewess*, and come of the stock of Benjamin. Did not my lord remember this thing, but condemn both me and my people to suffer an ignominious death, through the machinations of this wicked and vile apostate here, who has eaten at our table? Moreover, my lord the King hath put great trust in the merciless sayings of this great Aman, whom I here do swear is an enemy to my lord, also to myself and my unhappy people—a *viper, unclean and unsanctified*. This man *alone* circumscribed the death of thy royal person. Neither my race nor my kindred gave one single cause of harm, even to touch the sandals upon thy feet. O hear me, my royal

husband! Look unto me, and let my words plead for pardon and the dissolution of this awful decree; for 'tis this very man now before thee, whose countenance paleth as I speak, and who trembles upon his feet, who alone encompassed the death of the King of these nations. Behold, my people and my God are just, O King, though hard and bitter captivities may have made us to breathe murmurings oftentimes, and set us isolated within the cities of the plains and the mountains. Yet the God of heaven ruleth us; and not only us, but thy throne and thy life, my lord, inasmuch as Esther, a humble handmaid, hath been raised to speak thus, and to further seek my lord and wise husband's good safety in his rightful dominion, and denounce this wicked servant before him, before his very eyes! Furthermore, believe me!—This—this is my request, O King! And search me, ay, search the proofs of my words; for Mardocheus, my kinsman, honoured with thy merciful and cherished affection and esteem to-day, now waits without. He beareth every record with him. His words are true, and 'tis this Aman that hath secretly designed to slay him also from thy sight in the light of to-morrow's sun.

"Ay, come—behold, my just lord, the gallows without yonder! They are for *my kinsman*. Thy liege servant and friend, even Mardocheus, must perish upon the gibbet of Aman that waits him.

"Nay," she continued, looking ruddy and beautiful from her fervent zeal and excitement. "Nay, I perceive, my King, in whose word my heart hath learned to trust thus, will utterly frustrate these wicked designs, and will, as he promised, grant unto me my request, which is *the life of my people and my whole kin*, that

we may serve him faithfully, and follow the just laws of the land, and not die as the wicked so desire. See me, hear me, O master! See the handmaid chosen by thine own royal desire to be thine own wife! I will not rise from this ground until I hear thy voice. Let not this Aman, who hateth me and mine, who seeks our utter destruction, and mine with my race also—let him not triumph, and in the glory of his wickedness at last devise thine own death, my lord! *I am* thy wife, my lord. Heed me, I beseech, heed me now, and prove ye my words. By my God, and thy strange god, I have spoken truth this night.”

Aman had arisen totteringly, gripping in a terrible dismay his wide tunic. His face was a most pitiable sight. Like strong cords, the tissues of his nerves stood out over his neck and brows. An awful silence now pervaded the apartment. Only the thud of the footsteps of the guards upon the mosaic without, and the distant tones of the instruments, soft and mystic, mingled with the falling of the drops of water from the fountains of perfumes around them, could be heard.

Artaxerxes cast his eyes reflectively upon the frightened man. At this he shook yet more visibly. Huge drops of perspiration fell down upon the silk of his vestment, while his visage was absolutely distorted like that of a hunted slave, from the sheer intensity of his alarm.

“The Queen has denounced thee, Aman!” fiercely ejaculated the King. “Ah! thou doth shake visibly, and cast down thine eyes to the earth. So, O vile servant! is this thy service, thy zeal in mine own affairs and my person, that thou seekest not only the life of those whom I love, but compass mine own



“THE QUEEN HAS DENOUNCED THEE, AMAN!” [p. 324.]



death? Viper and slave, stand out! I demand thy face this way. I say, Turn hither, that I may read treachery even in thy gait and countenance. O Esther, Esther! did any but thee speak of this very man unto me, I durst not then give the bare words credit. My most familiar friend, my second father, whom I have sought to honour most of all. Ay, see! he answerest me not. By my father's sacred bones, he shall die then, accursed, accursed! because of his treachery."

Esther, withal a deep holiness giving her strength, knelt again, and kissed her husband's hand.

"O my lord," she said, "be not dismayed; for my God, who hast led not only mine own people through the furnaces of fire and bitter woes, but thy gracious forefathers too, will also lead thee and save thee also from the enemy. Let my God sustain thee absolutely. Therefore come with me into the sanctuary, for there His voice filleth all parts, and 'He' listeneth even to the voice of thy handmaid, and didst bring me here before thee for my people's sake. My lord, call hither Mardocheus, my kinsman, I beseech thee. He who aforetime waylaid the wicked eunuchs hath also sought to frustrate the evil within this man now before thee, who hath most vilely betrayed thy love and thine honour."

He arose, gazed upon her, bewildered, awestruck. He passed his hand over his forehead, and seemed utterly changed, his natural impetuosity and ireful passion crushed with the unbounded surprise. His jewelled cap fell to the ground heedlessly, causing his dark locks to surround his face in a dishevelled maze, whilst his eyes shone eagerly for some relief. "Give me thy hand," he said at length.

She did so, looking into his eyes sorrowful, yet essaying no words.

"I will go without upon the terrace. Ah! I want air. Feel, my brow is hot, like unto the fires of Moloch. Come to the door with me!"

"O King," she whispered, "be not afraid, all is safe. Who is master but thee?"

He returned sadly, "And yet I trusted him here! Come, let me think, let me think! Nay, *he shall die* in the place of those he sought to slay. He himself shall perish. By the victory of Ægos-potami, I see it all. I am nevertheless consumed with sorrow that I have been so unmindful heretofore. O Esther, see ye leave me not; do not fail me. Stay, I am thy slave; yet do thou not betray me also."

She answered, "Beloved master, God hath sustained me throughout, and I have thus spoken truth. Moreover, am I not thy wife? Nay, I will never leave thee."

He said, "Ay, so it shall be, Queen Esther, thou who shalt hereafter share my throne and dispense with me justice and judgment both; nevertheless, leave me a little space here. Erewhile go within. Summon the bodyguard to me. Call hither Mardocheus and the witnesses, and I will finish the thing this night; yea, I will grant thy desire, and more."

He cast himself down by a sycamore very sorrowfully, and she bent and kissed his hair, scarce realising what she did. He held his hands forth to grasp her, but she fled swiftly within, and was in the presence of Aman, her enemy, alone.

He now lay writhing in misery upon the steps of the King's dais, but hearing the rustling of her garments

as she re-entered, he lifted his head, arose upon his feet, and drew very near to her.

His breath came, hoarse and sharp; whilst a glow of heated madness from fear and spite had attained its highest frenzy, making his visage terribly hideous, that the very muscles of his body were intensified with the horror of his situation, that momentarily she gazed upon him as one paralysed, as she stood contemplating him in the silence.

Beneath his dark skin a livid hue was visible. Thus he stood panting, his thick lips muttering incoherent curses, looking upon her with wrathful eyes.

"It is thou, then?" he gasped, addressing her. "It is creatures like thee, who, like Huldah, and Judith, and Bathsheba of thy accursed race, that waylay slyly the hearts of men with the craft of thy abominations! ay, urge kings to war, and the sword to slay rightful inheritors of the earth. Ah! may the eye of Baalam curse thee! Behold in me the blood of a hundred kings, vast men of war, who ruled thy *crumbling dynasty* generations ago, when the old kings ruled the greater cities of the earth. Accursed are ye, vipers, death dogs, abominable deriders! And thou, a woman from the dung heaps, have scorned a king's decrees, and fashioned his heart into that of a whimpering cur, to break the just laws of the land, the which is sacrilege! O my sons, my sons! would ye not avenge me here at this moment upon these, and this woman? Would ye not gorge out the eyes of these enemies of our long race, and put even a king to shame before ye?"

"O jackals and apes, ye accursed Jews! and accursed a hundredfold this King who letteth the enemy of the Amalekites slip through our fingers, through a

woman's tongue and a slave's voice! Such as this Jewess."

Then an uncontrollable fear and humility rent him asunder again—a cowardice that was prevalent in him in any dire emergency, which compelled him instinctively to grovel to her feet. He felt her power was now immeasurable, distinct, absolute—above all—over the King's will. Her fatal influence had crushed his most cherished hopes, and not these alone, but the inevitable punishment of the traitor was to fall now upon himself, and he was to die ignominiously.

She had now retreated a few paces from him, not alarmed, but full of indignation that he should so plead falsely.

"Come no nearer," she cried, as she saw him advance. "I have now nought with thee, thou defiler. The King ruleth, and not the murderer; for the very God of my race whom thou deridest hath turned thine own evils upon thee. Thou reaped the same, and now thou wouldst sue for pity? Thou hadst *no* mercy; when thou didst come to thy master with the viperous breath of the liar, behold, there was none in thee. Sue not to me, therefore!"

Aman remained in abject misery at the stones beneath her feet. She knew what he was soliciting, and now fresh horror of his position seized him yet more forcibly. His tears, mingling with the great beads of perspiration falling down upon the mosaics, damped the place before her, while his voice arose at last almost to a shriek of frenzy, choked with the gurglings of his emotion rising in his throat.

"O Queen! ye eye of the greatest goddess," he shrieked, plausibly. "I am yet environed by remorse.

I serve *thee*, I worship *thee*, and I can command many to fall down in subjection like unto me! Hear me! Release me! Save me! Hearken, and let me not die! O turn the heart of the most Mighty One, the eye of Baalim—the great King, thy husband! Ay, behold I will work for thee wonders in the land. The Edomites, Ammonites, Egyptians, Carthagenians—all the world, and the gods thereof—shall render thee homage. I will cause the splendour of the great temple to cover thee. I will bring treasures, ay, as costly, as mighty, as those of Nitotris or Nicaulis, to be thine own—treasures from Memphis and Tyre in abundance, and many slaves; for I am the scion of a mighty family. I am most powerful, and will turn from hatred unto thy race now, and cause them to arise from captivity and slavery to be kings and princes upon the earth.”

She extended her arms, uttering, “Cease! Cease! The past cannot be atoned for now. Justice cometh from the God of heaven alone—the All-wise, All-powerful. What He doeth must be appraised. Arise, and speak no more to *me*! I am powerless!”

Her white-starred robes trailed the ground. She moved yet again a pace from him; while her large eyes were rivetted upon his figure, now dishevelled, uncouth, revolting in aspect, grovelling on his haunches like a slave.

Holding her raiment closely around her to escape contact with his yet nearer approach, she made a movement, as though to summon her attendants quickly; while he, perceiving the same, grew suddenly desperate through despair.

With a cry of an awful malediction at last, almost

like unto a wild and hunted beast, he sprang toward her on the instant, his soul incarnate with evil, consumed with frenzy and desire to annihilate her, for vengeance' sake upon her. His arms, streaming with the heat of his passion, naked to shoulders, encumbered her tightly. They were like the coils of reptiles; while his eyeballs were the colour of blood, distraught, and infuriate. He laughed shrilly, amid pleas and infamous curses, muttering incoherently, "Ah! if I find no mercy, can I not kill thee now? Scorn me! Gasp loudly, O Queen! Ha! ha! thou canst not break these shackles; they are of iron fret by the god! Howl! howl! I can crush thee, for vengeance sake—for vengeance upon *thine* accursed people and thee! I, Aman, *sued to thee*, kissed thy feet, wept for pity—ay, but to be scorned. I will not die, I say! Ah! thou shriekest! What! So! so!"

He pressed his hot hand fiercely over her face, wholly dismantled of the veil. A mark of blood became imprinted thereon; then she suddenly became endowed with greater strength, and cried loudly, beating her hands before her to get freedom and to repulse him. "Help! Come quickly, O Sucbuchadas, Acratheus, Silpho, Täis; for I am consumed and in danger. Come, help quickly!"

Finally, the force of a sudden blow from an unknown hand at once caused Aman to reel over upon the Queen's ivory couch near. He lay there quivering with rage, more despicable than the lowest slave, ghastly, with fists clenched and bleeding.

Esther was kneeling then at the feet of Artaxerxes; for he, hearing her cry of anguish, had fled bareheaded from the garden, and with a blow had caused this

wretch to instantly release the Queen, whom he had sought to revile and destroy within her own palace.

"Sacrilegious wretch! dost thou add this impiety and sordid corruption to those evil doings already exemplified? Slave, beast! thou art too vile a thing that I shouldst lay mine hand upon. Death is less cruel than thee, a pestilence less foetid than thou. Contemptible wretch! thus soughtest thou to defame thy King's wife, even by thy most profane touch! Ay, shall not the whole of thy execrable race perish? Oh, grovel in the dust; be ye tortured! Let those whom *thou* didst seek to maltreat and scourge, maltreat thee for what thou art! Behold, now Artaxerxes hath done with thee and the Amalekites for ever! Ye are accursed by thine own mouth and deeds, and there is no pity for thee."

Raising his voice in an imperative command, and addressing the crowd of servitors and women slaves, he cried—

"Summon Mardocheus, my saviour; and conduct this slave Aman apart from us. Thou, Sucbuchadas, chief eunuch, stand forth; and ye of my bodyguard, seize that traitor and retain him safely; for he defiles our sight, since he is utterly vile and base."

Changing his tones on the instant, he turned to Esther and said, "Thou, O my beloved, fear nothing! Lift up thine heart! All thy request shall be done, for art not thou my counsellor and my sacred heart?"

She looked at him with luminous eyes of gratitude. Her lips, trembling, answered, "As my lord liveth, I know this. Yet how can I speak aright the praise of my God's name, and tell of His wonders unto me? O King, I am henceforth servant unto my lord *for ever*."

"And partner of my throne also," he returned, fervently. "Forgive me that I compassed thy life ever with sorrow. I was then too vile and unworthy. The breath of *thy* God permeates in thy body; now, therefore, impart to me also a like blessing, that I may be as thyself—just to my people, and fair even unto mine enemies."

"Even so, dear lord of our nation. The God of my life and my race *will* bless thee."

A detachment was heard coming hither, and voices, many in number, were already crying loudly—

"Hail, Mardocheus! favoured of the great King! Hail! hail! hail!"

As he entered the crowd, they bowed before him successively, while Suchbuchadas led him on to the monarch and Esther. The young Queen was animated and exceedingly beautiful now, inasmuch as joy and holy zeal had radiated her countenance with the most majestic and perfect expression of beauty. She hastened forward to the side of her beloved kinsman, and, kneeling as a lowly maiden once again, she fervently pressed his hand to her lips. He passed them tremblingly over her head, then upon the long waves of her shining, dark hair, and thrice blessed her, calling her in the old household name, "*Hadasseh! Hadasseh! Hadasseh!*"

When she arose amid the solemnity of the scene, the vast concourse of slaves and Aman gazed wonderingly. Artaxerxes waving in their midst—

"*Behold the Queen!!!*"

The highest officials here took up the word, touching their finger-tips to the ground, whereupon one mighty voice responded from all the multitude of throats

surrounding them, "Hail! great Queen Esther! Behold, we do thee reverence in the name of the King! In the name of the populace also. Hail! hail!"

She trembled slightly, yet Artaxerxes sought to reassure her. All was forgotten of the pompous ceremony. He tried in every shape to serve and please her in the sight of all.

"Sucbuchadas, O King," she ventured, "my principal eunuch, hath somewhat now to plead unto thee."

"Bid him speak, that the truth may be discovered, for he is a witness of the truth thereof."

He motioned on the instant with a certain typical gesture, indicative of his command to the eunuch to say whatsoever he wished. Sucbuchadas then lifted up his voice and responded—

"O King, mighty and wise, eye of the land, live for ever! Thy servant went forth this even to summon Aman the Grand Chamberlain to supper, and mine eyes looked above the expanse of the city; the while they fell upon the great places, the walls and the palaces of the mighty. Then, O King, just and equitable, thy servant beheld a high gallows upraised before the gates of great Aman's palace; and when I went from my standing out to the Court with the message of the Queen, my mistress, and at that time did I inquire of the servant of Aman concerning these same gallows. For after, saith he, 'Behold, didst thou not hear that my master has ordained the scribe Mardocheus shall hang thereon at sunrise to-morrow?' Thy servant then answered, 'Nay; and why, seeing this great man to-day hath been most highly honoured by my lord the great King? Surely the workers err and do evil. The gallows are not for *this* good man, whom the

King loveth and esteemeth worthy to crown with such honour.' He therefore answered me, 'Even so, I say. He is a *Jew*, and an enemy of my master. Suffice, the guards of Tophet, the third son of Aman, will seize this culprit to-morrow. See ye not, therefore, how great a sight is to be prepared for the people? for the height of the gibbet is full fifty cubits. Come and see.' Then, O great King, came I hither instead, and I supplicated the woman Tais to carry unto the Queen, our mistress, this matter. And I brought hither also word to the Queen's kinsman also of all this, and carried it to him into the Court. Thus as I have spoken, and by my God the truth."

Sucbuchadas then prostrated himself before the throne, and passed backward to his own place, observing Artaxerxes was silently pondering.

Then presently the King arose, motioned Mardocheus to his side, and drawing from his own hand his agate signet, placed it upon the forefinger of the right hand of the Jew. "In token," said he, very graciously, "that thou art alone in future my counsellor next unto the Queen my wife, to aid me in justice and in the ruling of my kingdom henceforth. In that I have proved Aman, that vile and treacherous murderer yonder, unfaithful; and he indeed whom I favoured and raised to be next me above all men immoderately—a participator of crime and base injustice to my liege subjects the Jews. I hereby decree that he shall die the death of the wicked, upon those same gallows he has himself designed for thee; and not only he, but his six sons, and his wife and family. Moreover, do I now intrust this matter fully into the hands of the faithful Mardocheus, my counsellor, who has held my life in his

hands hitherto, and destroyed my murderers, he being akin to the Queen.

"Go hence! disperse ye! Conduct the base calumniator and the ungodly to the iron cells at the city gates! Do as ye will with him. He is now the enemy of the King who ruleth; and if any of ye be my friends, see ye to my words, and carry out my commandment, for as ye have worshipped him aforetime, in like measure now condemn him for my safety."

Howling with pain and terror, they swiftly hustled Aman forcibly away. His groans were heard a long distance in the night air afar. Some of the women drew near to him as he passed, spat upon him, and pierced him with their long bodkins. Out upon the highway to the King's Gate crowds gathered, having heard, pressing forward eagerly to look upon one who had once revelled in the habit and dominion of a kingship and completely vested with power. Men groaned ominously within themselves. Some had suffered keenly from the burthen of taxes laid upon them by this very man's instigation; others, having worked in the city like slaves, had had Aman's servants set upon them, and had experienced sore treatment, having the scorpion laid upon them daily. These reminiscences spurred them on to sip now the full draught of vengeance upon this tyrant, whose day was fast closing in, and who had laughed death once to scorn. Triumphantlly they hurried him on and on. Now and again he turned, hustling his elbows frantically to free his pinioned arms, but without avail; for a janizary's lance pricked him in agony forward again, on, amid the execrating howls of the populace.

Germes of nearly every nation sought some excess of fury upon him. From that cringing obeisance com-

pelled upon them heretofore for fear of this man, they now became a mass of complicity of ideas as to how they might add to his misery. His five sons were captured, while the guards surrounded his house to prevent the escape of Zeresh. The whole night was a turmoil, the metropolis was stirred into a warfare of outrage and horror, omnipotent over everything.

At last the darkness passed, and the mists of early morning sped away over the mountain tops and the plains around. The whole commingled populace of Susa was astir early, crowds eagerly gaining the centre square within sight of the high gallows now in waiting for the culprit. The Jews hastened to receive their faithful deliverer Mardocheus on the site of the Acropolis at early dawn, for great consternation now prevailed among the race.

The Jew appeared habited in the robes of state next unto the King, with his chain of office. His array of slaves and guards were multitudinous. These obeyed his every gesture and word, as he stood upon the steps of the Acropolis to view the execution of Aman and his family, for his nation's sake. Here an elephant, gorgeously caparisoned, waited to convey him round the city, while a thousand men, armed from the soles of their feet, were to accompany him, and awaiting in readiness his signal.

Then at last a fearful, prolonged cry of wrath sped through the morning air, and at that signal came Artaxerxes, in company with Esther the Queen, who stood before the perfume chamber on the terrace, and viewed the whole scene of tumult.

The people, being Jews, Cappadocians, Amalekites, Syrians, and some of the mountain tribes, surged like one vast body to the high gates of the palace, with

exccrating cries. Groans now filled the air. Hands and weapons were uplifted ; whilst the Jews, known alone by their habiliments and their features, wielded formidable weapons of warfare. These all were strong men, and, moreover, the gates of Susa having been opened, hundreds had come in from the neighbouring villages on account of the desire to succour their fellow-men, and further take share in the just punishment of their enemy and his race, as the King now gave decree.

An awful uproar sped its destroying seal as Aman's body arose, suspended in mid-air, and dangled at the chief entrance of the Court or the city gate. Huge catapults struck him as he hung, and his dark body swung to and fro in revolting desecration. They looked upon him as a beast only to be slaughtered, and accounted their doings as part compensation of their own past sufferings. Tophet, Silpha, Barsha, Carnum, and Gozio were in turn gibbeted, but Absinœe alone was absent ; so they then sought for Zeresh, Aman's wife. Herds of enraged men fled through the house of Aman (goaded on more by the sight of blood) in quest of this woman ; some, now half-naked, heated with excitement, bemoaning the past, slew all they found therein.

The wife of Aman, meanwhile, had secreted herself upon the tower, where the bones of the Amalekites, ancestors of her husband, lay. Here she invoked the aid of Bel, her god, calling plaintively over the city lest the destroyers should reach her. She, moreover, cursed them in every part, spat upon her hands, and anointed the soles of her feet with an unctuous matter she found in the cistern of the dead, as an antidote against the slayer. As she heard the

thud of feet in quest of her, she flew with great agony upon the roof—higher and higher. She saw the metropolis crowded below. Gibes and fierce groans were arising, though a splendid sun revealed the brilliant colours of the army and the robes of those below in the morning light.

She stood at last upon the highest roof of the tower *alone*; for her slaves, eager to save themselves, had fled, and many could be seen now making their way to the rocks, wherein to hide and escape the infuriated mob, and save their lives. The red mantles of the elders and the glittering headgear of the soldiers were conspicuous above the rest. Yet vengeance was not appeased.

Fierce maternal passion now surged in her breast, that her heart hardened. Forthwith she moaned aloud over the sight of her five sons and their executioners. She beat her bare breasts in utter desolation, and tore out her thick hair in masses.

They found her lastly crouched behind a dial, which she grappled with her scratched and bleeding arms; while she burst forth over them a torrent of furious words, indicative of her foul spirit and her mockery of all their orders. She even blasphemed the spirits of her family, who had brought her this. She cursed Isis, her daughter, and deliriously bit at her capturers like a tigress bereft of her offspring, and fretted with an agony inconceivable.

Finally the men, seeing she troubled them much, and they cared not to transport her forcibly to the square of the metropolis where the body of the slain lay, now rushed upon her with loud yells. Two Herculean negroes succeeded in raising her at last over the balustrades, high in the air. Her yellow

cloak floated in the breeze, and her jewels fell from off her head and ankles. These two men held her firmly pinioned over the ridge, while a crowd stood around them and below. In the midst of this they stood. A thousand voices drowned her cries, for all instantly realised the intention of the men. Whereupon a Persian lieutenant came foremost to them, his hatchet besmeared with hair and damp blood. He motioned for silence.

"Nay, what shall suffice us?" cried the negroes, still holding the woman high above them, over the height. "*What say ye?* Let us finish this miserable work."

"Throw her over!" urged the crowd, "accursed sorceress! Let her go. Loose her."

They answered, "Yea, for the King's word sake and honour. Yea!"

Then they immediately put forth their utmost strength, and, with a shout deafening and portentous, sent her crashing over the edge of the tower. Fiercely they watched her body descend. It bumped with a loud thud against the stone promontory beneath, crashing the skull terribly in the downward course. From thence it skirted the iron ridge of the projecting tier, lacerating the victim's flesh to a fearful intensity, and finally was precipitated with great force in a mass upon the great, sharp, gilded pikes of the railings which formed the wall of the palace, her domain. These spikes penetrated her body entirely, and she remained fixed, with great, ghastly eyes and protruding face upturned—a mass of mutilation, unrecognisable, void of life—dead!

Thus was Zeresh, the wife of Aman the Amalekite, slain; and they let her body stay to feed the carrion of the air until only the bones remained.



CHAPTER X.

THE PREVAILING DRAGON.

MARDOCHEUS received his after promotion and high station as from the hand of God alone, whom he served, and in completion of the promise spoken in his dream. And Artaxerxes, wrapped in the wisdom of his Queen, and, moreover, fully assured of the devotedness of Mardochæus, made it now his duty to advance their cause with the Medes and Persians to the uttermost, and further their joint interest. He sent posts throughout every city and the smaller villages of his dominion, proclaiming his desire to receive the Jews as friends, and ordering that none should lay a finger upon them or deride them in anywise, under penalty of sure death. He likewise rendered these absolute power and means to destroy all those who had professed enmity and derision towards them, either by fire or the sword, as it pleased them.

On the twelfth day of Dystrus¹ a wild havoc pervaded the whole land. Levites, garbed in their robes of office, paraded the streets, exhorting the people to fight for their God and the liberty of their race. Priests, clad in costly pontifical robes, bearing censers of holy incense and precious ointments, came

¹ The Jewish Adah.

forth praying for deliverance for the just, and destruction to the enemy of the high God, and utter extermination of the idols which filled the land.

A fearful slaughter ensued. The whole community of Israel banded themselves together, and starting through every street within the city slew with their sharpened arms the whole of their deriders, numbering about five hundred, within the walls of Susa alone. Also, according to the command of Mardocheus, certain experts were sent forth to every unwall'd town, issuing the decree that, in vindication of all pristine wrongs and bitter sufferings, orthodox Jews should exterminate their foes in the best and easiest manner possible, for their future advantage.

Thus stood they for their just liberty and lives in the land, cleaving those who had bound them to an ignoble slavery for generations to earth. Avenging flames of fire fumed their course from every part of the domain of Artaxerxes into the blue heavens for the space of three days, and at the close no less than seventy-five thousand bodies were strewn lifeless over the land that Artaxerxes governed.

But at sunset, on the thirteenth day, came six ships, emblazoned with the arms of Aman, into the quay of the river. Cowed by an alarm presentimental, Absinöe stood upon the decks, expectant of some laudation from the cravens of his father's race to welcome him home. Ay! he had been sent as a guest for the god whom they worshipped. He had gone thither, leaving myriads of sycophants chanting on the shores his praise. He now returned invincible, lofty, and a conqueror.

He was crowned with a diadem of plumes, waving in the breeze ; a necklet of sacred teeth was around his neck, and his colthurns were studded with holy beads. While he awaited the heralders to signal his approach, a band of warriors ascended the steps of his galley in an impolitic fashion.

"From whom comest thou?" he asked peremptorily, in a lofty spirit.

They answered, "From the great King himself."

He replied, "'Tis well. Where, then, is my father, Aman the mighty?"

They merely pointed to the gallows, where a shapeless mass of bones seemed blowing to and fro in the wind, swayed by the breeze, without either flesh or raiment.

He gasped suddenly, and clutched at a bag of lynx skins suspended from his thighs, bewilderingly. While he did so, one of the men of Israel sprang upon him, and plunged a knife into his throat swiftly. "Thus perish all the Amalekites, enemies to God and Israel!" they cried in one voice. "Perish, thou wicked deviser and slayer of innocent men, like thy fellows!"

They afterwards unclasped from his fallen body the pouch, thinking it contained much treasure; but the corpse they flung over into the water, beside the galley.

At this moment one of the captains apportioned by Mardocheus to command a certain number came forward, checking them; for, said he, "touch not the treasure of the ungodly. It worketh evil to us. For the *gain of iniquity* can be nothing pertaining to that which should prove a holy warfare. Nay, cast it over after the heathen; it avails us nought."

Yet they perceived by the lightness of the skin, and

having a desire to see what Absinœ the chief had considered of such value as to bear upon his own person homeward was neither metals nor precious stones, nor anything that could be conceived by them, they continued to be curious to look within. One, therefore, emboldened by this desire, broke the iron cord asunder. They immediately fell back, amazed at the sickening spectacle revealed before them upon the deck. Two human heads, ghastly and blood-stained, fell, like the dead portions of a slaughtered animal, upon the boards, rolling out to their feet. A shiver seized the men as a chief with his javelin point then turned them over, faces upward, to sight. They then perceived that one was the head of a woman, inasmuch as her long hair was plaited to the curled scalp locks of the man, and she was young and fair.

"It is the daughter of Aman, *last* of the accursed race," said one. "Behold, her brother hath slain her in Babylon for his father's sake."

Another recognised through the mutilated features the head of the Babylonian toparch Zerobabel. The dead chief's mouth was open wide, revealing the large ivory teeth. The lips had the appearance of derisive laughter, but the tongue was gone. The men shuddered, notwithstanding the enmity within them. They seemed to revolt against this horrifying act of Absinœ, the Amalekite chief.

"They were only brought hither," said Belula the captain, "to gratify the vengeance of Aman, the evil one yonder; but take them now ashore, and bury them *decently*. Surely they have suffered enough in this ignominy now—no more. Let them rest."

Yielding, therefore, to this surging of humanity, they bound the heads, in a lion's skin at hand, and two gave them space in a portion of the garden of one of the eunuchs, previously in the service of Aman, and buried them there.

Considerable peace prevailed in Susa on the following day. Fires fed with purifying matters, sanctified by the High Priest of Israel, were set burning throughout the metropolis everywhere. Mardocheus had heretofore sent messengers unto every place, habitations of the tribes, specifying the doings in the capital, and further exhorting the Jews to keep feast and rejoicings upon this day, the fourteenth. "For," said he, "therein God hath delivered the enemy into our hands, broken the bonds of captivity, and turned our mourning into joy. Keep this day, feast therefore, and for ever, in the generations to come, in sign of '*Peace*.' For through Esther, which we have known as Hadasseh of our race, hath the Lord given the instrumentality wherein to work, through God, our salvation. Therefore rejoice, and rejoice! now that the evil is purged from out of our midst. Be no more stubborn by the force of woe and derision, but in the humility of true thankfulness receive these wonders given marvellously unto our nation in this great day for all time."

Moreover, Artaxerxes, in conjunction with his beloved Esther, wrote, authorising every person, of every sect, to neither molest or deride this nation, now accepted and established by the great King himself, and assisted by those whom he had called upon to honour and love, in place of destroy. These letters

patent were issued and called Phurim, as was also the days of their deliverance, and formally sealed.

On the eve of the fourteenth, the royal household, the High Court, and also the household of Mardocheus, came into the King's Palace, and made feast therein.

A great joy illuminated the face of the Queen. She sat beside Artaxerxes, beautiful, magnificent, according to her rank and to the desire of her husband. The sheen of her silver-threaded robes, and the jewels of her royal state, shone resplendently. All eyes were continually fixed upon her with a great reverence. And near her right hand was the calm, long-suffering Zillah, in the quiet garb of her race, with a light of perfect peace upon her aged countenance.

The dais of Mardocheus, now the second ruler in the land, was three steps beneath that of the royal seat. Here this just man sat, encompassed by no pride of position, save the outward grandeur of his state, and the rightful obeisance of the subjects due unto him. He arose, holding his hands out extended to the throne in supplication.

The King responded, "Speak! my second father, kinsman of our blameless Queen! Speak as thou desirest, that we may heed thee!"

Mardocheus bent his head. "Great Ruler of the nations," he cried, in a clear voice, "thou King Artaxerxes, of the hundred and twenty-seven provinces, from Indus to Ethiopia, live! Ay, reign supreme in wisdom, peace, and happiness! The land is quiet now; and, behold, God ruleth the universe.

"Years ago, in the past, was I before thy forefathers,

who now sleep with the just. I was in Jerusalem, our capital. I laboured also in Babylon, from whence came I hither. I have groaned in the spirit deeply, and suffered in the flesh ; but this is now past. Death no more triumphs through the breath of the ungodly and the murderer, for God hath done these things unto *us and thee*—that same God that desireth thee also. For now again I remember a dream, nothing of which hath failed, and this wrote I to the heads of our people ; also I expounded it to one whom in our tribe we call '*Hadasseh*.'” Here he raised his hands in the attitude of a blessing, crying, “Hail ! Queen Esther, whom the great King loveth ! Hail ! and be perpetuated in our memory for ever !

“O King, this dream cometh to me here in this solemn feast, and it was this when I expounded in like words to my people. Hearken ! and there was in my dream a noise of a tumult, and great uproar was in the land ; and, O King, two dragons came forth to fight, and the nations trembled, and made ready to fight the righteous people. So darkness and obscurity came upon the land, and the righteous people trembled, fearing their own evils, and were ready to perish.

“Then they cried unto God, *our God*, and upon their cry, as it were from a little fountain, was made a great flood. The light and sun arose, and the lowly prevailed and were exalted, and devoured those that were glorious. And, O King, listen still ; and this is what has been shown me of God concerning this dream, the interpretation of all. Behold, *Aman* and *I* were as the two dragons, and those nations were those set to destroy the Jews. Now the voice of the little

fountain was *Esther's the Queen*; whereas there cometh up a mighty flood—that is, *the wisdom of my Lord the King's decree against our enemies*. And now the greatness of the King's words have established our peace, the sun of our ransom has arisen over us for ever, and the darkness has passed from us—ay, passed away from over all the land.”

The King arose at the close of his words. A radiated germ of grateful light shone on his countenance. He clasped the hand of Esther; and, as they stood together, he spoke softly, “Worthy Mardocheus, my most intimate friend and adviser, rest thee now peacefully. I have established fully in mind my words henceforth, and they shall in nowise fail. Thou, prevailing dragon, whom *thy God* and the god of my father hath revealed unto *me* through the mouth of my beloved Queen here, shalt now rule under me. A new code shall be established for ever. This shall be thine own work. And, behold, I, Artaxerxes, accept also thy just faith. I turn from that god which I have so unwisely been led to worship. There, therefore, may thy just God rule my heart and kingdom as He hath ruled that ancient nation He loveth so peculiarly as His own, for ever. Furthermore, O excellent, let my own heart uphold this, and let the generations to follow show that unto this woman, the wise and beloved scion of the stock of thy people, owe I my throne, my life, and salvation now and ever.”

As Artaxerxes reached forth his hand, and drew Esther to his side, the whole assembly, not more eager and excited than loyal, pressed forward, and

with profound expressions of adoration and wonderment, gave vent to fervent acclamations of joy: "Hail, hail to the God of Israel and His people! Hail to the great King and Queen, His servants! And woe to Bel, who worketh us mischief and death! Woe, woe to his followers who have betrayed us hitherto!"

Then, at the uplifting of the ruler's hand, a great, impressive calm instantly pervaded the Court. Every voice was hushed once again.

"Let us forget the struggles of the mind," said the King, calmly, "for let us rather rejoice and make merry at the saving of the just through the hand of a woman and a Queen. Therefore sound the lutes and the nablas, and let all the friends of the King, the companions of his heart, drink and forget, and praise in so doing, and the faithful rejoice with us."

And with the sweet and curious strains of the instruments the Court dispersed thus, and they one and all gave themselves up to free rejoicing.

Thus was great Israel restored to freedom and peace through the might of a frail creature in the flesh, though these long since have passed from the Courts of the East, still living in the perpetual memory of the "just" for ever.

E. LEUTY COLLINS.

FINIS.





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